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ALL FALL DOWN

A **CRIME CLUB** *Novel*

A Crime Club Detective Story

MR. L. A. G. STRONG's new story of murder and sudden death has many striking and unusual qualities. It is in essence a novel of high distinction. Mr. Strong concentrates on what is psychologically the most interesting part of every murder case—the circumstances that precede the crime. He shows how murder is the logical outcome of certain mental processes and describes convincingly and dramatically the events that lead—almost inevitably—to the perpetration of the crime. *All Fall Down* is a notable achievement in its lifelike portrayal of character. Paul Gilkison, a young bookseller, slightly prim and rather diffident; Inspector Ellis McKay of Scotland Yard, cockily robust and worldly wise; Matthew Baidon, an old collector of first editions who loves his books better than his own family; the village school teachers Eunice Caunter and David Rattray, caught in a gamut of conflicting emotions; all are characters that live vividly in the reader's memory long after he has finished this absorbing story in which they play their strikingly individual parts.

By the Same Author

SLOCOMBE DIES

DEWAR RIDES

THE BROTHERS

ALL FALL DOWN

by
L. A. G. STRONG



Published for
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by COLLINS 48 PALL MALL
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To
NICHOLAS BLAKE

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CHAPTER ONE

SCREWING up his eyes in the morning sunlight, Ellis McKay stumped down Regent Street. His rolling walk was slower than usual; slower, and less decisive. As he reached the corner of Vigo Street, he stopped irresolutely, and thrust out his underlip in a gesture of simian perplexity.

It was one of those early summer mornings when nobody seems to be in a hurry. The mild, swimming air, the day's benign promise, reached all alike. Even those who had definite errands were sauntering, to get the utmost from the sun; some smiling to themselves as if possessed of a happy secret, others looking about them, full of interest in their fellow creatures.

Ellis, standing stockily in the middle of the pavement, drew many a glance of surprise and veiled amusement. The thick, sturdy figure, the cheerful rubicund face with its prominent blue eyes, the high forehead topped by tufts of reddish hair that stood up round a large bald patch like furze round a clearing, had a knack of drawing attention anywhere. This morning, in the mellow, peaceful air, it was quite startlingly incongruous. Ellis was wearing a sports jacket of vivid tweed, a shade between green and blue possible only to the dyers of the Hebrides. His thick legs were clad in dirty gray flannel bags, his check shirt was crumpled, his tie crooked. His crimson cheeks were tinged with a yellowish pallor, the violence of his features blurred with an obdurate red stubble. The grimaces of indecision, and the dolorous tenor humming that accompanied them, completed a study in eccentricity which caused passers-by to give him most of the pavement to himself.

Suddenly, with a loud snort, Ellis turned sharp right and plunged up Vigo Street. Whatever decision he had come to had evidently cleared his mind and mood together. The puckers left his face; he blinked rapidly, rubbed his left eye with the back of his hand, squared his broad shoulders, and stepped out. His humming shot with a jerk into the major key, and he beamed right and left, disturbing the half-tones and shadows of the narrow street with colour and absurdity.

He did not go far. Before the street widened, he lowered his left shoulder, executed a burlesque turn, and pushed open a door. The familiar smell of the bookshop hit him, tangible

as warmth when one comes in from a cold night. A girl assistant, dusting books with a feather brush, straightened up at sight of him and grinned. Then, as she saw his condition, her grin faded swiftly to a look of concern.

"Mr. McKay——!"

Ellis winked, and looked past her enquiringly. She pointed with the brush.

"He won't be long."

Paul Gilkison was busy with a customer. He turned, raised his brows, then continued his eulogy of a modern poet.

"—there are still plenty of the first edition to be had, but enquiries are beginning to come in. I've had three this week,* from America; and that's usually a sign."

The customer dully contemplated the volume in his hand.

"You think they'll go up?"

The bookseller's smooth chin rose a couple of inches.

"That is not my reason for recommending the purchase. I don't look at it that way. If I did, I should surely get all the copies I could lay hands on, and hold them for a rise."

There being no reply, he went on:

"I never recommend an author unless I believe in the quality of his work. That's my only criterion."

The customer looked up, wary, unconvinced. Ellis whistled softly through his teeth, and made a rude gesture towards the customer's back, causing Gilkison to cough and look hastily in another direction. Then he plodded over to a table of books. He made to pick up from it a new limited edition, caught sight of his hands, and rubbed them on the seat of his trousers. As soon as he was satisfied, he picked the book up gingerly, and examined it.

Gilkison was showing his customer out.

"I'm sure you won't regret it. Yes. Thank you so much. Good-morning."

Ellis did not turn as he heard his friend's footstep.

"Gillie—you ought to be shot. The bloodiest of ramps. The ordinary edition, plus thirteen and six for ninepenn'-orth of binding and the author's signature."

"I know. I know. But I have to stock it."

Ellis gazed at the flamboyant scrawl.

"What a hand. If anything, it's filthier than what he writes in it." -

"Come to that, you look pretty filthy yourself."

"Do I? Yes. I do, by God. Hide me. I'll scare your customers."

"Come in the back. I'm just going to have coffee. Hester."

" Yes, Mr. Gilkison ? "

" Mr. McKay would like a cup too."

" I would, and all."

The girl smiled at Ellis, and disappeared between two high bookshelves. Gilkison led the way to his sanctum, stopping to wait as Ellis peered at the exhibits on the tables.

Once in a chair, Ellis stretched and yawned deafeningly.

" Tired ? " Gilkison asked.

" M'm. Had no sleep for three nights. None to speak of. Bad case. Long and tough."

" Finished ? "

" An hour ago."

Ellis shook himself. The spectacle of the little fanatic in the top back room in Percy Street, fighting with the silent ferocity of a trapped rat, came between him and the morning.

" Sort of case I hate," he said. " Poor devil, brave as a lion, serving his conscience, doing what he believes to be right : and I've got to hunt him and send him to his death."

" Your conscience against his, in fact," Gilkison said, as lightly as he could.

" I? I'm a hireling. It's my livelihood. No conscience about that."

Gilkison knew, from the belligerent thrust of the underlip, that Ellis wanted to be contradicted, and fly into further excesses of self-denigration. Wisely, he held off.

" Going to get a rest ? "

" Yes. Chief had me in, complimented me, and gave me a week's leave."

The note of complacency was in such contrast that Gilkison wanted to laugh. He stirred his coffee busily. Ellis relaxed and sighed.

" I felt all to pieces. Didn't know what I wanted. Then I knew. Books. I want to rummage, Gilk. Nothing else'll do me."

" You're welcome, as you know. But you'll have to rummage alone. I'm off in a few minutes."

" Where ? "

" Home. To pack. I've got to go down West."

Ellis sat up.

" Auction ? Vicar died—rush to rob the widow ? "

" No. I'm going to see Matt Baidon."

" Who's he ? "

" Don't you know ? You must have heard me talk of him. He's got one of the finest private libraries in England. Must be seen to be believed. All higgledy-piggledy, yet he can find

any book inside two minutes. He lives in an ordinary small house, and it's stacked and piled solid with books, from cellar to chimney. Double in all the shelves—on tables—on chairs—on the floor, everywhere. And what books! He's got by far the best collection of the 'nineties I've ever seen."

" 'Nineties, eh? Why does he want you? Is he selling? "

" No such luck. He's been ill, and wants 'em valued, that's all."

" What—the whole lot? Take you a while, won't it? "

" A couple of hundred picked ones. I've been there to see 'em twice before." Gilkison's voice took on a grim note. " In 1929, just before the slump, Matt Baidon parted with seven books—only seven—and netted two thousand three hundred and sixty guineas. And two o! the books were duplicates. I tell you, it's a marvellous library. I wish you could see it."

He looked at Ellis.

" Why don't you come with me? You can. You're on leave. It'd do you good."

Ellis regarded him.

" How? "

" Easy enough. I'll say you're an expert I've brought with me."

" Thanks. I'd be bowled out in a minute."

" No you wouldn't. Stick to your 'nineties. Besides, you wouldn't get a word in edgeways."

Gilkison saw that he had decided to come, but would still argue. He smiled in quick affection for the bellicose absurd figure sitting forward in the chair. He could see just what Ellis must have been like as a small boy.

The girl, putting her head in to see if they wanted any more coffee or biscuits, caught the smile, and smiled back. The two men were as unlike as possible. Gilkison, tall, dark, and donnish, in navy blue, with his gentle, musical voice and few smooth gestures, seemed a perpetual reproof to his explosive and uncouth companion.

" I'm persuading Mr. McKay to come with me," Gilkison told the girl. " I tell him a holiday will do him good."

She flushed.

" I'm sure it would," she said eagerly, smiling from one to the other. " Would Mr. McKay like a little more coffee? "

" Mr. McKay, having a tongue in his head, says thank you very much, he would."

She looked flustered for an instant. With an unspeakable

grin Ellis put her right, and she took his cup and went out giggling. Ellis grunted.

"The way you enslave these girls that work for you. It's disgusting."

"I?" Gilkison spread his hands. "Monstrous! It is *you*, on the other hand, winking and leering——"

"Don't evade, don't evade. You know perfectly well that you never rest till you've wormed your way into their immature affections, done the helpless bachelor at them, made them yearn to sew the buttons on your pants——"

"This is disgraceful. This is positively coarse," Gilkison exclaimed in delight.

"I have never seen a man take fouler advantage of the fact that young women are economically dependent on him. You make every request a solicitation, every approach a caress. Your very voice——"

"Be quiet," Gilkison said sharply, as the girl came in.

"Thank you." Ellis beamed on her. "I really do need it."

"I'm sure you do," she exclaimed, and withdrew.

"I *never* leer," said Ellis. "Give me a biscuit."

Gilkison surveyed him.

"Well. Are you coming with me?"

"Where is it?"

"Seven miles from Exeter."

"When do you start?"

"Hour and a half."

"Does he collect gramophone records?"

"My dear man—I've no idea. Why should he?"

"Why shouldn't he? I do."

"A dangerous standard to apply. Are you coming?"

"Damn you. I suppose I might as well." He heaved himself to his feet.

"Paddington. Twenty past eleven."

"Train goes?"

"Yes."

"I'll be there eleven ten. Keep a seat for me."

"*Don't* be late." A note of entreaty came into the book-seller's precise voice. "It's no joke trying to keep a seat nowadays. People say the foulest things."

"Hand 'em back, with interest."

"You enjoy being rude. I don't."

Ellis rubbed his chin. A look of extreme surprise came over his face.

"I must shave," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

GILKISON stood at the door of the compartment, clicking his tongue with nervous exasperation. The hand of the big clock was close on the quarter.

"No. I'm sorry. Both these seats are taken."

The burdened soldier looked sulkily at him, and shuffled on. A woman in the compartment made an audible remark. Gilkison's ears reddened. He tapped his foot, and looked down the platform in despair.

Suddenly the crowd parted, and the well-known figure came charging along. Ellis caught sight of Gilkison, and waved his free hand. The other clutched a corpulent and ancient Gladstone bag, over which dangled an overcoat and a mackintosh. As Ellis drew near, Gilkison saw that the bag had been rendered lethal by the addition of a stout three-legged easel, thrust through the straps.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo." Ellis had made one of his characteristic quick recoveries. His hair stood up briskly, his face shone. "Got a seat for me? Good."

"A precious job I've had to keep it." When he was at all agitated or excited, Gilkison relapsed into a slight lisp. "About fifty people have tried to take it. I've had some very dirty looks."

"That won't hurt you. Now then."

Ellis looked at the full racks, then at the woman who was sitting next to his corner. Every line of her was tense. Resentment quivered up from her like heat from heather.

"Do you mind if I put my bag under your suitcase, madam? It's far too heavy to put on top. May I move this along? Thank you. That's most kind. Upsy!"

He executed a series of violent manoeuvres, swung up the bulging bag, stood up on the seat, tucked in his coats, then jumped down, and gave the rigid lady a beaming smile.

"There we are. That's grand."

He sat down firmly, wedging his broad behind into the narrow space accorded him.

"Well, Gilk, my boy. Terrible lot of people travelling these days. Even the corridor's full, further down."

"Some people got to travel," the woman said, to no one in particular. "And take their turn for seats."

"Yes," Ellis cried. "Yes. That's the worst of our profession, madam. We're so busy protecting the public, we get

no time at all for our ordinary pleasures as citizens. Sometimes we haven't even time to get our rations. For two weeks on end, Inspector Gilkison, my colleague here, was obliged to live on birdseed."

Gilkison started indignantly.

"It was him or the parrot," Ellis continued, "and, as he was in the middle of a most important case, he felt it his duty to keep going. The bird lost weight, but I'm happy to say it has completely recovered. In fact, it seems the better for its fast. Wouldn't you say so, Inspector?"

Gilkison's newspaper shot up, and concealed him. Ellis beamed at it, beamed at the unresponsive face beside him, settled himself comfortably, and, without any warning at all, went to sleep.

He did not wake till four hours later, when he opened one eye, and found the train running down the gentle wooded valley that leads to Exeter. He leaned forward, stretched, shook himself, and grinned at Gilkison.

"A brief nap. Did I snore?"

"You breathed heavily."

"Really? A mark of the greatest confidence, to go to sleep in a compartment full of strangers. Nothing makes one look sillier or more defenceless. Have you ever seen yourself asleep, Inspector? No—I suppose not. On the whole, I think you're lucky. The recollection might keep you awake."

Resignedly, Gilkison stood up and began taking things down from the rack. Ellis watched him.

"Let me see. Are there six victims, or only five?"

"Seven," Gilkison said, without turning round.

"Tut, tut. You shouldn't exaggerate. You'll undermine the public's confidence in the force. They'll stand for five women killed with a chopper, or even six: but not more."

"Get your things down. We're nearly there."

"I like that path. Look—there, on the other side. It runs along above the road, on a sort of cliff. Grand place for a murder."

The train rattled in front of a row of houses, and drew into St. David's.

"Good-bye all," Ellis said, and got only the vaguest murmur in reply.

"I didn't have much opportunity to study our fellow-travellers," he went on, to Gilkison. "What were they like? Did you beguile the journey with happy chat? No? You should. You're too much taken up with yourself, Gilk. Too self-centred. Too much the bookworm."

Gilkison was making enquiries of a porter.

"Come on," he said. "The train hasn't gone yet. Here—keep that infernal thing to yourself. What in heaven's name did you want to bring that easel for?"

"Always bring everything. Never know what you may want. But you haven't told me about our fellow-travellers. Did they pour out their hearts?"

"They were likely to, after your saying I was a policeman, weren't they?"

"You think it put them off? Surely not. People talk to me all right."

"Before they know what you are. Not after."

They climbed into the small local train, where they had a compartment to themselves. Ellis flung himself back in the seat.

"Don't go to sleep again," Gilkison admonished him. "It's only twenty minutes' run."

"I'm short of a good twenty hours."

"You'll get plenty to-night."

"That'll only put me back to normal."

He closed his eyes, but did not sleep. The train joggled along through placid fields and wooded valleys, stopping every few minutes at stations where nobody seemed to get in or out.

"This train walks in its sleep," Ellis observed. "Lord! Are we there?"

The station at West Nattering has nothing to distinguish it from a thousand of its kind, but in the afternoon sunlight it looked well enough. Declining the services of an aged porter, Gilkison led the way outside. The porter, pulling himself together, followed and apologetically took their tickets. A decrepit taxi was standing in the sun. After some difficulty, Gilkison succeeded in rousing its driver, and demanded to be driven to the Plume of Feathers. Ellis took no part in these proceedings, looking about him and snapping his fingers in satisfaction.

The drive was not long, and they were soon decanted into the cool porch of the inn. Gilkison paid the driver, and went inside to the office, whence Ellis heard his clipped tones and a soft answering murmur. He stepped outside, and stood sunning himself. A cat picked its way across the road, fastidiously, as though a puddle threatened each step.

As Ellis stood, blinking and stretching himself, a burly man pushed past him and went sharply off to the right. Ellis's trained senses took in his appearance, his well-pressed

clothes, and the fact that he seemed to be in a hurry : but he paid the man no conscious attention. The sun poured down in almost solid warmth. He could feel its weight upon his upturned face. Hens were clucking lazily somewhere at the back. The peace of a Devon village : Ellis thought of his free days ahead, and purred with pleasure. This had happened well. He was glad he had come.

Then he was aware of Gilkison standing beside him, staring after the man who had gone up the road.

"That's odd," Gilkison said. "Did you see who that was?"

"No."

"That was our friend Josh Nelder."

"What—of Cuffe Street? The bookseller?"

"You could call him a bookseller; though booksellers wouldn't like it."

"Touchy lot, booksellers."

"What can he be up to? There's only one thing to bring any one who has to do with books down here; and that's Matt Baidon."

"Has no one else a book?"

"Nothing to interest Josh."

"Perhaps he's here in one of his other capacities."

"Surely the old devil can't have written to him too."

"That's it," suggested Ellis happily. "He's written to every bookseller in the kingdom. Twenty-five will arrive on the next train, and a further forty by the midnight. He'll make you all bid against each other."

"Matt isn't selling." Gilkison had learned to extract from Ellis's utterances any sense they contained. "I only wish he were."

"He may not sell to you. As I told you, you lack the human touch. Too self-centred. Josh may be more successful."

"Josh has a very different sort of touch, certainly." Gilkison bit his nails. "Look here. D'you mind if we go and call on old Matt this evening, after all?"

"Weren't we going to, anyway?"

"No. Our appointment's for to-morrow morning. I can make an excuse, and say I wanted to introduce you, and ask if you might come too."

"You seem scared of the estimable Mr. Baidon."

"A crusty, curmudgeonly, miserly old ruffian. But he does love books. When it's to do with books, he's almost human."

"The sooner we meet this paragon, the better. But—I warn you—I must have my tea first."

"Your dishwater, you mean."

Gilkison led the way in, and rang the bell. A remote and rusty jangling was heard, and presently a young girl came in to answer it.

"Tea for two, please. And a great deal of hot water. This gentleman likes his tea very weak. And brown bread and butter, and marmalade."

"I don't know 'bout the marmalade, sir. I'll ask."

"If you can," Ellis said, with an enormous smile. The girl withdrew in confusion.

"Disgusting," Gilkison said severely.

CHAPTER THREE

A SQUARE, uncompromising box of a house, Matthew Baidon's stood a little way back from the main road, protected by a crop of singularly hideous trees. The catch of the blistered gate was broken, and had been replaced by a loop of wire. The short drive was untidy and weed-grown, and the whole house much in need of paint.

"Doesn't spend much on appearances," Ellis remarked.

"All goes on books."

"Any family?"

"Wife and daughter. They have a tough time of it, I should think."

The Baidon bell-pull was one worse than the one at the Plume of Feathers. Of the same pattern, it didn't work at all. Gilkison was nervously preparing to knock, when Ellis reached past him and beat an outrageous tattoo with his knuckles.

"Sssh!" Gilkison hissed.

The noise was certainly effective. An old man's voice creaked testily inside; there was a subdued answer; a pause; soft footsteps, as if some one were hurrying out of sight; another pause; more footsteps, and a hand at the door.

The door opened, and a woman stood against a background of almost total darkness. In the still bright sunlight, she had the pallor and clarity of an apparition.

For a moment she did not see them clearly against the light. Then, as Gilkison smiled and introduced himself, it seemed to Ellis that a spasm of terror agitated her face. It was gone, a shiver only, as the face relaxed into a conventional smile: but he could swear it had been real.

"Why, of course, 'tis Mr. Gilkison. How do you do, then."

"This is a friend of mine, Mr. McKay. He is an expert on the literature of the 'nineties, and I've taken the liberty of bringing him along to introduce him to Mr. Baildon."

A look of doubt came over Mrs. Baildon's long, smooth face. "I don't think—how do you do, Mr. McKay—I don't think he was expecting you till to-morrow."

"I know he isn't," Gilkison was at his most charming. "That's why I've brought Mr. McKay along now, to know if I might bring him with me to-morrow." He raised his voice, as a querulous call sounded down the passage. "His opinion will be of the greatest value to me."

As Mrs. Baildon hesitated, the noise off became articulate.

"Annie! Annie, I say."

She looked at them with an apologetic, hunted expression, backed a step or two, and called back over her shoulder.

"Yes, Matthew?"

"Come yer w'en I calls 'ee. I can't go scritch'n' me guts out."

She gave the visitors another glance of apology, and went in further.

"Did I yer you say 'twas Gilkison?"

They could not hear her murmur.

"Turn en away. 'E ain't doo till to-morrow. Or no. Let en come in. I got summat to say to en."

There was another murmur. Before it could be answered, Gilkison, with a swift look at Ellis, darted down the passage. Ellis, following, noted with amusement that, although his head did not come near the doorway, the bookseller had stooped instinctively. That was the sort of feeling Matt Baildon's house gave one.

Evidently Gilkison knew his way. The passage seemed pitch dark. A crack of light came sideways from a doorway, and he sidled into it. Putting out a hand to feel the wall, Ellis made for this opening, and went in after him.

Just inside the doorway, and at right angles to it, a long high bookcase jutted into the room. Opposite it, all along the wall, bookshelves reached almost to the ceiling, so that one entered the room through a high laneway of books. The jutting bookcase was so long that it left a small space only through which one could get into the rest of the room; so that the occupants were completely hidden from Ellis as he made his way in. Moreover—and this, plus the length of the projecting bookcase, accounted for the darkness of the entry—the top of the bookcase was piled up to a dangerous height with books stacked, some upright, some on their sides, to

make an additional wall of extraordinary symmetry and neatness.

As he rounded the corner, Ellis nearly stumbled, and put out a hand to steady himself. A cracked scream assailed him.

"Mind out! Mind out what thou'rt doin' of! thee clumsy gert ozebird!"

Ellis found himself looking full into the brilliant, snapping eyes of an old man in a wheeled chair.

"What sort of a bird is that?" he said immediately.

As he spoke, he stepped to one side, the better to see his host. Matthew Baidon sat, leaning forward, one thin, ridged hand on the wheel of his chair. A shawl over his shoulders and a fat plaid muffler about his neck gave him a bunched effect, combining with his tight skull cap, his beaked nose, and long streaming whiskers to make him look like an indignant old hawk puffing out its feathers.

Ellis's reply disconcerted him for a moment. He glared malevolently.

"Don't 'ee go oversottin' they books. 'Tis the work of hours to put 'em up again."

"I can see that. A work of art. How many have you got on top there—five hundred?"

A triumphant gleam came into the old man's eyes.

"Five hundred! hark to the man. You'm no sort of a calculator, if you reckons that's all there'll be."

"He'd be a clever man who'd get five hundred books on there."

Baidon looked at him. Pride and contempt were balanced in his face. He grinned savagely.

"Think so, do ee? Well—sh'll I tell ee how many there *be* there?"

"I can't see how many there are inside the stack. I mean, there might be a lot of very thin books. But I'd lay a bet there aren't more than five hundred."

"You'd lost your money, master. Seven hundred and eighty-four books, there are, 'pon top that there case."

"Seven hundred and eighty-four! Marvellous!" Ellis walked around, to survey them better. "Marvellous," he repeated. "After that, I'll believe anything. Even what Gilkison here tells me."

The old man rose to the bait.

"And w'at do 'e tell ee, eh?"

"Can't tell you that, Mr. Baidon. Might make you blush. One thing I may give away, though. He says you can find any book in the house inside five minutes."

This tribute did not appear to please Matt Baildon. He scowled.

"If 'e said that, 'e's a liard."

"You used to be able to," Gilkison claimed anxiously. "I've seen you."

"Used to be. Used to be. Well"—he glared at Ellis—"that did used to be true, I allow. But tidn' true no longer. I don't get about so suant these days."

Mrs. Baildon spoke, so suddenly as to startle them.

"He can tell me where a book is, and I can find it, can't I, Matt? But nothing like so quick as what he could."

"No. You'm a fool. You don't know the books. Not after all these years, you don't know 'em. I got to say ten from th'end, or 'tis a tall red book three parts along."

"I've no head for so many. Joan's the clever one."

"Would be, if she was mind to. But there, w'at d'ee expeck. Young people 'aven't got no sense."

Ellis shook his head sadly. Gilkison, judging the moment as nearly propitious as possible, presented him.

"This is Mr. McKay, who is a well-known expert on the literature of the 'nineties."

"Never yerd of en," said Baildon promptly.

"He has a rather specialised reputation. The general public has hardly heard of him at all—in this connection."

"I knows 'most everybody to do with books: and I never yerd tell of en to this minute."

"For that matter," said Ellis coolly, "I never heard of you, till this morning."

"A man can be quite famous in a special circle, and not be known outside it." Gilkison was getting nervous again.

"Like Luttersley, for instance."

The old man gave a grim chuckle.

"'Twadn' good folks should come to know much about he."

"I think that quite a number of people feel that way about Mr. McKay," Gilkison smiled. "I called this evening——"

"Why for? I wrote to ee plain enough to come to-morrow mornin'."

"I wanted to present Mr. McKay, and ask if you would allow him to help me. His knowledge would be of the greatest assistance."

"Rubbidge. You don't require no 'elp. I shouldn't 'a asked ee yer, else."

"I should not waste your time and mine by bringing along some one who would be a hindrance."

Matt Baildon looked at him for a moment without speaking.

"It's just so well you 'ave come now," he said, "'cos I shan't be able to see ee when I said."

"Really, Mr. Baildon? But——"

"No. I got some one else comin'. Some one important."

"Indeed."

Gilkison's tone was perfect. Ellis gave a snort of delight, and started to examine the shelves.

"Yes. An American. Come all the way from Noo York to see my books."

"Ah," Ellis said, without turning. "Those chaps know what's what."

"When would you like us to come, then, Mr. Baildon?"

"Day after."

"As you prefer. I must point out, however, that it will add to the expense if we have to stay an extra day."

"I don't pay for he," Baildon said, pointing at Ellis. "Not a 'a'penny."

"Nobody asked you to," Ellis sang, over his shoulder.

"I'm here on pleasure." He turned. "Only two of Dunkerley here. Where's *Beeches at Night*?"

"Upstairs," snapped the old man. "I be mendin' the cover."

"Is it the ordinary paper covered edition, or one of the five that were bound specially?"

"There isn't but two of they ever come 'pon the market," Baildon answered. A flush appeared on his thin cheeks. "I don't pay no fancy prices. Never 'ave, nor never will."

"Some of Mr. Baildon's best have come from the sixpenny barrow," Gilkison said.

"Or the penny tray, sometimes." Matt went off into reminiscence, while Ellis, listening, continued to examine the room.

Quite large originally, it was so filled with books that there was very little space to move. The bookshelves reached from floor to ceiling on all four walls. The window seats were stacked with books, three tables were piled five feet high, and, in front of one of the bookcases, distant about a yard from it, a regular rampart of the largest books reached breast-high, leaving only room enough for a person to pass at either end. Even the gramophone, which stood on the floor by one of the window-seats, had a pile of books on top of it.

Ellis turned back to the invalid chair, and interrupted its occupant without ceremony.

"I've never seen so many books in such a small space. Just been checking up on the Watsons. Pretty good. I'm

going to enjoy looking over your books, Mr. Baildon. D'you use the gramophone?"

The old man glanced at it, and scowled.

"I don't set no store by it. 'Tis Joan's."

"Any old records? Interesting ones?"

Baildon stared at him angrily.

"I don't know what the maid 'ave got."

"Don't collect 'em yourself?"

"Collect 'em! Ooever yerd! W'at d'ee take me for?"

"You ought to. Give you a new interest. Lot of money in it, too."

His only answer was a bilious glare. Then, reminded by the mention of money, Baildon turned to Gilkison.

"You can start this time to-morrow, if you'm mind to. Can't go throwin' money away."

"Very well, Mr. Baildon. Thank you so much."

Ellis beamed.

"And I may come too. Thank you, Mr. Baildon. You can teach me a lot, I see that."

"I could learn 'ee manners, if I was twenty years younger. And I would."

Ellis winked at him.

"I'm going to like you, Mr. Baildon. You say what you mean. So do I. Good-night."

Before the indignant old man could reply, he had followed Gilkison from the room. Mrs. Baildon saw them to the door, and took nervous leave of them.

"A fine old chap," Ellis said to her heartily. "A real character. Good-night, Mrs. Baildon. Thank you so much."

He was humming cheerfully as they went down the drive, and into the road. As soon as they were out of earshot, Gilkison turned on him.

"You idiot. You nearly had us thrown out."

"Nonsense. You don't know how to handle him. Give it him back, broadside for broadside, and flatter him in between. I'll have him eating out of my hand to-morrow."

"I don't know which is worse: your conceit, or your manners."

"He fetched you a good one, anyway. Can't see you to-morrow morning: he's seeing someone important. Take that, you bloody tradesman."

"You and he are a good pair." Gilkison wrinkled his brow.

"What I want to know is, what is Josh Nelder doing here?"

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NEXT MORNING, after a very late breakfast, Ellis took easel and paintbox, and set off towards Matt Baildon's. In reply to Gilkison's comments, he announced his intention of sitting in a place from which he could keep the house under observation and see if Gilkison's friend Mr. Josh Nelder put in an appearance.

Gilkison sniffed. "There's nothing to paint there," he said. "Even a lunatic like you couldn't pretend he wanted to paint Matt Baildon's place."

"I shall sit by the crossroads and idealise the view."

"You'll need to."

"I'll be quite happy. I'll fall into converse with the villagers, and probably learn facts of great importance. Besides," Ellis added in afterthought, "you forget, I'm not on duty. I'm on holiday. Why shouldn't I cultivate my harmless hobby?"

All the same, when he came to the place, Ellis had to admit to himself that Gilkison was right. The only view which anyone could at all plausibly wish to set on paper was from the far side of the crossroads about a hundred yards below Baildon's house: and from this point it was not possible to keep watch on the gate. One could see anyone who approached the gate, but not whether he went in. Ellis noted, however, that there was a small side gate, opening into the road that led down to the main part of the village.

Still, none of this mattered. All he wanted was to sit in the sun, with a pretext for observing what went on and for getting into conversation with passers-by. Not that Ellis was ever diffident about starting a conversation. But country people, he had found, were invariably curious to look over the shoulder of anyone who was sketching, and regarded him as a species of skilled but harmless lunatic. They would therefore talk to him even more freely than in their own homes or in a pub, watching, hypnotised, the quick brushes at work. Ellis, if he had ever taken the trouble, could have done good work. He had the knack of producing a quick and lively impression, and he worked fast. This had the double advantage of holding anyone who was watching, since the painting grew before his eyes, and of enabling Ellis to get enough down on paper to justify a far longer session, leaving him free to observe whatever he wanted.

This morning, however, he was on holiday. Gilkison's breakfast speculations over the presence of his trade rival Ellis refused to take seriously. He promised to keep a lookout, but in such terms as to draw upon himself an acidulated rebuke for frivolity. Now, having established that he could not in any case see whether anyone went in the Baildon front gate, or came out of it, he dismissed the matter from his mind, and considered the singularly unpromising scene before him.

With broad self-parody—in which he usually indulged when his spirits were high—Ellis put his head on one side, screwed up his eyes, surveyed the flat field, the ugly clump of trees, the crossroads, the open laneway that cut past Matt Baildon's side door, then the sky, placid almost to fatuity, that beamed above. The scene had no element of colour or composition: it was just an agglomeration. The only way to treat it, he decided, was with a sensational vulgarity. Ellis uttered a sudden high rattle, and started to mix his colours, talking vigorously to himself as he worked.

It was as well that he was content to be out of doors in the sun, and expected nothing from the morning; for nothing resulted from it. Nobody came to look at what he was doing, except a small boy and girl, who stood behind him, sniffing monotonously, and, when he asked them whether they had a pocket handkerchief, stared and made no reply. He saw no sign of Josh Nelder, nor of anyone else who looked as if he might be calling on Matt Baildon. A man, pushing a woman in a bathchair, might possibly have gone in, since he came back again. Equally well, he might not.

It was five to one by the time Ellis decided that he had done enough. Chuckling to himself, he packed up, and went back to the Plume of Feathers.

Gilkison was not to be seen. He did not come in till nearly a quarter past, by which time Ellis was sitting down to a large plate of cold lamb and a pint of the local beer.

"M'm'm. 'Si' down." Ellis's mouth was full. "Make yourself at home. I knew you'd feel awkward if I waited."

Gilkison sat down. His severe features wore an expression of faint disgust, which meant either that he was preoccupied, or that things weren't going quite as he wished. He pulled out a handkerchief, and wiped his forehead.

"Sweating, I see." Ellis nodded approval. "Excellent. Do you good."

"My dear Ellis. One of your many depraved heresies."

"You ought to like this lovely, warm weather. After your musty shop."

"It is *not* musty," Gilkison said decisively.

"It smells musty. You ought to be thankful for the heat. We get so little of it."

"I don't mind it. It's uncomfortable for walking, that's all."

"Obvious remedy—don't walk. Sit down, like me. What were you walking for?"

"For one thing, I wanted to try and find out where Nelder was staying."

"Tut. A one-track mind. Did you?"

"He isn't at either pub."

"He may be in lodgings."

"My dear Ellis. I'm not an imbecile. The possibility had crossed my mind."

"Sayings of the week. 'I am not an imbecile. Mr. Paul Gilkison.' Well—how did you go about to locate the estimable Mr. Nelder? No. Don't tell me. I know. You went about and said you wanted lodgings."

"A very natural procedure. Ellis—for God's sake! don't make such a noise. What is there to guffaw at in that?"

"You!" crowed Ellis. "You, going from cottage to cottage and saying you wanted lodgings. If you could only see yourself. Did you wear gloves, by any chance? No? You should have. That would have finished it."

"If you would have the goodness——"

"It's a damned good job we're not here on business. You'd have queered every conceivable pitch. Look at yourself, man! You, dressed like that, talking the way you talk, mincing up cottage paths and saying you want lodgings. Now, if *I* did it, they might believe it. I'm dirty enough, and I know the way to talk to them. They could only think I was mad, and they think that already. But *you*——"

"If you'd have the goodness to let me finish, instead of braying and gubbling——"

"Your vocabulary's improving. Good! You'll have quite a neat turn of phrase by the time I've done with you. Well—go on—what is it you want to say?"

"Naturally, I did not pretend I wanted lodgings for myself. I said our old housekeeper had had an operation, and I wanted to find a nice quiet place where she'd be well looked after."

"Yes," said Ellis, after a pause. "Yes. That's in character. That's not bad. You're coming on, Gilk." Ellis leaned over, and patted him affectionately on the arm.

"Kind of you to say so," Gilkison said, with a wary eye on the greasy knife.

" Always encourage the learner. Praise where praise is due. Works wonders. You didn't find Nelder ? "

" No."

" He's not staying here, then ? "

" It appears not. But there are a number of villages around where he might stay. I took the bus to two of them, but drew blank. I'll have another try this afternoon."

" You have a certain pertinacity one can't but admire. Misguided, perhaps : even stupid. But let that pass." Ellis handed him the mint sauce. " No ? Well, well." He poured himself a second lavish dose. " Why do you attach so much importance to the appearance of the fellow Nelder ? "

" I know him. He's not the sort of man to come all this way for nothing."

" I grant you that. But what he's come for may have nothing to do with our suave and courteous friend up the road. There may be a score of shady opportunities in the neighbourhood, which we know nothing about."

" There may. But I have the strongest feeling that he's here on some business to do with Baildon. Otherwise, why did he rush away as soon as he heard my voice ? "

" A sensitive ear, maybe."

" Ellis—really—this prep school repartee——"

" Is there no other person or place in the neighbourhood that might interest him ? Are you certain of that ? "

" There's a junk shop on the Moreton road that has a few books, but I've never found anything there worth bothering about. Anyway, he hadn't been there. The books were thick with dust, and the man told me nobody'd turned them over since Friday week."

" Someone's died, or is selling his library—or his gramophone records. Is Nelder interested in records ? "

" Not that I know of. He might be. Anything he might make a dishonest penny on interests him."

" He knows something you don't know. Or he was just passing through, and wanted a drink."

" Nobody passes through here. It isn't on the way to anywhere."

Ellis yawned.

" I'm tired of Nelder."

" Sorry to bore you with my affairs."

" Hoity toity. Do you know what I'm going to do ? "

" Retire, and plunge in hoggish slumber."

" Coarsely worded, but correct. I advise you to do the same. Wake me at tea time."

CHAPTER FIVE

"LIFE," Ellis pronounced, "has shrunk to a pattern. After tea, we go to call on Matt Baidon. On our arrival, Matt Baidon is rude to us."

"There may be a variant or two this afternoon," Gilkison said, "when Matt starts cross-examining you about the 'nineties."

"That was your lie, not mine. I shall see that it recoils on you."

"No doubt."

The two were walking up the road. The sun was still very hot. The haze that had softened it earlier had been burned away.

Matt Baidon's trees stood staring in bleak ugliness. They looked lumpy and indigestible in the sunlight. His front gate was open: a small van was drawn up against the kerb.

"'Daffodil Laundry,'" Ellis read. "A hankering after the grace which nature has denied him."

They went in. As they rounded the stiff bend in the drive, a man came round the angle of the house at a half run. His face was yellow, his eyes at once startled and gloating. His lips moved, and he was muttering soundlessly to himself, as if memorising the lines of a part.

As soon as he saw them, his eyes opened to their widest. He shook his head, and made a strange wavering gesture with his hand.

"No. You can't go in there," he babbled. "No. Not in there."

"Why not?" Ellis asked sharply.

"Mr. Baidon."

The man could not get his breath. He had to shape the words with his lips before he could utter them.

"What's wrong with him?"

"'E's dead."

"Dead?"

The man nodded. "Doctor's in with en." His words came suddenly, in a rush. "I been in to leave laundry. Couldn't get no answer, didn't hear nobody, so I puts me 'ead in to the front room, to ask where they'm all to, and then I sees en, layin' all knocked over, like."

Ellis and Gilkison exchanged glances, and ran up the steps, Ellis leading. They fumbled hurriedly down the dark passage, and into the room.

It was strangely lighter. As he rounded the corner of the jutting bookcase, Ellis realised why. The rampart of books was gone from the top of it, and the light now poured across it unobstructed.

Another step, and he saw where the books had gone. The floor was piled deep with them, a scattered angular avalanche, from which arose, like a half-buried building, Matt Baidon's wheel chair.

All this Ellis saw half consciously. His eyes had fixed on something more remarkable. On the floor, among the shoal of books, the huddled figure of their owner lay all awry. Over him, on one knee, hampered by the books, bent the figure of a large, powerfully built man in brown tweeds.

He looked up angrily as Ellis entered. His lean face was dark against the light. A patch of hair grew on each cheek, above the line of the razor. Long moustaches did not altogether hide a wide, resolute mouth.

"This is most improper," he exclaimed thickly. "What are you doing here? Get out at once."

Ellis clicked his tongue.

"You've moved him," he cried accusingly.

The doctor glared.

"Of course I've moved him, you bloody fool. How else d'you think I'm going to get at him?"

"Never move the body. You may destroy vital evidence. It's clear you have no experience of police procedure."

The doctor's pupils went small.

"You a policeman?"

"I am."

"Thank God I haven't, then."

He bent down, and went on with his examination. Ellis looked at him with wrinkled brow, and suddenly grinned. The doctor's head jerked up again.

"Why the hell shouldn't I move him? What right have you to question me, sir? This has got nothing whatever to do with you. This is a purely medical matter."

"I'm not so sure, doctor."

The older man's face became clotted with rage. He gazed at Ellis, his moustaches working. A bright bead of saliva gleamed at the corner of his mouth.

"You——"

"How was he lying?"

The abruptness of the question startled the doctor. He was silent, then growled, "On his face."

"Where he is now—or have you pulled him clear?"

"I moved his head and shoulders."

"D'you move any of the books?"

"As they were all over him, I did. Does *that* reveal ignorance of police procedure?"

Ellis took no notice of the belligerent glare and out-thrust chin.

"Books on top of him, eh?"

"Everywhere."

"That muffler. Was it round his neck, or loose, as it is now?"

"Damn it all, sir!" roared the doctor. "How do I know? My concern is with my patient. I've better things to do than worry about mufflers and buttons."

Ellis shook his head.

"Sorry, doctor. But I refuse to believe it."

"You refuse to believe what?"

"I refuse to believe that you, a trained professional observer, would not notice, even unconsciously, an important detail of that kind."

The doctor got up, dusting his hands together. He stood well over six feet.

"Exactly what do you imply by that, sir?"

"I imply nothing. I'm simply telling you that you most certainly must have noticed whether Mr. Baildon had his muffler knotted round his neck, as he had yesterday afternoon, or whether it was loose, as it is now. If it was knotted, you must have undone it. Come, doctor. There's no use in our quarrelling. If I've offended you, I'm exceedingly sorry. I'm a bit uncouth sometimes, I know. My friend Gilkison here is always telling me of it. You see, I have my job to do, just as you have yours. I think of it first, and of my manners afterwards."

The doctor's face did not relax during this speech. He regarded Ellis grimly, and, at the end, he grunted and glanced down at the dead man.

"It wasn't knotted," he said gruffly. "It had one end slung loosely across. I pulled it away to examine the patient."

Ellis smiled.

"Thank you, doctor. I knew you'd remember. Thank God for professionals. The trained mind never lets us down. Does it, Gilk?"

The doctor looked at Gilkison.

"You a policeman too?"

"No. A bookseller."

"A bookseller?" The eyes narrowed again. "Baildon wasn't selling."

"I am only too well aware of that. He sent for me to value certain books. I had performed that service for him on more than one occasion."

"Sent for you, did he?"

The doctor seemed surprised. He looked down again at Matt Baildon. Ellis stepped across the disordered pile of books, and kneeled down beside the dead man.

Matt was an unpleasant sight. His mouth was open, and the interior of it looked dry and discoloured. The eyes started from the sockets, half open, dull, already devoid of moisture. The beak of the nose was accentuated in death, and the face fast taking on a waxen fixity. The fingers of his hands were clenched beneath the thick woollen mittens.

Ellis peered close, lifted a corner of the moustache, and began to whistle through his teeth. The doctor watched him satirically.

"Satisfied?"

Ellis turned on him a gaze half meditative, half aggressive.

"Looks to me as if he'd been suffocated."

The doctor gave an angry bark of laughter.

"Well he may—with his face in the rug and a couple of hundredweight of books on top of him."

"Face in the rug, was it? D'you mind showing me exactly how he was lying?"

The doctor put his hands on his hips. It was almost exactly the gesture of a fishwife about to let loose a flood of vituperation.

"Look here, Mr. Policeman—I don't know your name——"

"Detective Inspector McKay, of Scotland Yard. This is Mr. Paul Gilkison, of Vigo Street. You are——?"

"My name's Carter."

"Mr. Baildon's physician?"

"Why else d'you think I'm here?"

"You might have been called in, as the nearest doctor."

"There isn't another in the place," growled Dr. Carter.

"Even if there were, I am sure Mr. Baildon would have consulted you. But you were in the point of saying something to me. Please go on."

The doctor glared. He cleared his throat.

"I was about to ask you what you think you're playing at? This is——"

"I don't think I'm playing at all. I wish I were. I came here for a holiday."

"Inspector McKay is a book collector," Gilkison interposed. "I brought him in to see Mr. Baidon's collection."

"Indeed." The doctor continued to glare at Ellis. "Well—except that you'll be disappointed in that aim—you can resume your holiday. There is no occasion for your services here."

"You think, then, doctor, that this is a straightforward case of accident?"

The doctor snorted.

"Of course it is. What else could it be?"

"Mr. Baidon appeared to have a good deal of life in him yesterday afternoon. I should have thought it would take more than this showerbath to extinguish him."

"You're a layman," the doctor said with contempt. "I daresay you know no better."

"I await instruction."

For a couple of seconds it looked as if he were not going to get it. The doctor scowled, and looked at the back of one of his large hands before replying. They were hairy as an ape's.

"I repeat, I can't see what concern it is of yours," he said. "I may tell you, however, the deceased had a coronary thrombosis. I have been treating him for it for a considerable time. I'd kept him in bed for the past three weeks, and only let him downstairs yesterday for the first time. In his condition, a shock like this—why, man, it would knock out you or me."

Ellis nodded.

"Who was with him at the time?"

"No one."

"How did it happen?"

Dr. Carter shrugged.

"This—this structure was exceedingly precarious. A touch would have brought it down. He might have bumped into it with his chair. Anything."

"Was the chair exactly where it is now? Or did you have to move it?"

"Try to move it," Carter exclaimed.

They looked at the chair. The books had fallen in a mass between it and the shelves. Stepping gingerly across, Ellis put his hand on it. It gave a bare inch in one direction; otherwise it was immovable. Books lay on the seat.

"H'm," Ellis said. "He was sitting with his back to the bookshelf. The books fell towards him, hit him on the head and shoulders, and knocked him out of the chair face down—"

wards: and he died of shock, or suffocation, or both. That your theory?"

"I am not bothering to form a theory."

"But—forgive me—you must. You have to sign the death certificate."

"That is not a point on which you are qualified to advise me."

"Technically, no. But——"

"His condition was such that I should not have been surprised to learn that he had died at any moment."

"There will have to be an inquest, doctor. The jury may——"

The doctor cut him short with a roar.

"What the hell d'you think you're doing, sir, coming down here and thrusting yourself in where nobody wants you! Just because you haven't enough to do in London, you come down here and try to work up a murder out of a case of pure accident, to get yourself notoriety and drag an unfortunate family into the glare of public attention and suspicion. Go back to London, I tell you, there's nothing for you here!"

He broke off, foaming. There was a hush. The violence of his voice seemed to reverberate among the shelves.

"Tut, tut." Ellis looked at him benignly. "Think a minute, doctor. When you're on holiday, and you hear of an accident in the next street, do you rush to be first on the scene? Do you? Nor do I."

"Get out, then—and leave me to deal with this."

"I'd love to, doctor. But I'm afraid it's gone beyond your province. You said I was trying to work up a case of murder. (I didn't say so—you did.) On the contrary, I'd be only too glad to accept your theory of an accident. Only, there are one or two difficulties in the way. May I tell you what they are?"

"My good sir. An old man with a dicky heart keeps, against all advice, a stack of books reaching to the ceiling. He knows himself how dangerous it is. The first thing he always does, when anyone comes into the room, is to warn them not to knock against it. He's been three weeks upstairs, and comes down yesterday. This afternoon, he's by himself, he wants a book, he manipulates the chair a little clumsily, maybe, after his spell in bed, he bumps into the bookshelf, and brings a load of heavy books down on top of him, with such force as to knock him out of the chair on his face. As if the blow isn't enough, his face is buried in the rug. What more do you want? The thing's plain as day."

"What evidence have you, doctor, that he bumped into the bookshelves with his chair?"

"It's the most obvious way for the accident to have occurred."

"To bump into the bookshelf, the chair must have been just underneath it."

"Of course."

"Look where it is now."

"Well?"

"It's pointing at an angle of about forty-five degrees away from the bookshelf. Its nearest distance to the bookshelf is—what—four feet? In the direction it's facing, it must have travelled a good six. You can't move it now, either way. Did the books knock it all that way before any of them could fall in front of it? And before they knocked the old man clear? Not possible, doctor. It doesn't make sense."

"What's more—take a look at the near corner of his moustache. Underneath. Here—let me lend you a glass."

The doctor stared at Ellis, then slowly went down on one knee.

"Yes. There. If I'm not mistaken," Ellis went on, "that's a thread from his muffler."

"There's nothing in that," the doctor said slowly. "If he had the muffler knotted round his neck, his moustache could easily have rested on it and caught up a thread."

"Maybe. But, taken with the position of the chair, it makes one think."

The doctor got up. His face showed some emotion.

"Let me give you a piece of advice, sir. Be careful how you stir up theories and speculation here. This man's wife and daughter have suffered enough as it is: more than enough. Don't, I beg of you, add to their pain unnecessarily. If ever there was a blessed release, it is here. For them, I mean. Not for him. Everyone in these parts knows it; and no one will look kindly on any attempt to make things difficult for them. On the contrary, it will be fiercely resented."

"I was just going to ask you about the wife and daughter, doctor. Where are they?"

"Upstairs."

"I shall have to see them, I'm afraid."

The old man looked hard at Ellis. His great hands clenched.

"If you harm them——" he said, and did not finish. Then, unexpectedly, his tone changed. "Let them be, Inspector. They didn't bump him off. Though I wouldn't have blamed them if they had."

Gilkison started, and stared at him, his eyelids fluttering rapidly. Ellis merely nodded.

"I gathered that things weren't too easy."

The doctor jerked his head towards Matthew Baidon's body.

"He was my patient, and I did my best for him. But I've been tempted more than once to give him his quietus. As curmudgeonly an old skinflint as ever grudged his cat a lick of the plate. He gave those two hell."

"An unamiable soul, our Matt." Ellis looked tolerantly at the corpse. "Violent, in earlier life, I'll be bound."

The doctor nodded. "Everything went on books. If it hadn't been that he liked his food, they wouldn't have had enough to eat. They had to fight him for every penny. The girl's eyes—that was due to his neglect. Wouldn't spare the money for proper attention. Damn it, he grudged their calling me in if they were ill."

"Was he more manageable lately?"

"After that business of Joan's eyes, I've been able to handle him a bit," Dr. Carter said, with a grim set to his jaw. "I managed to frighten him properly that time. But it was like getting blood from a stone, always. Joan wants to go to Oxford. Been set on it for years. A clever child—at the school they all said she should go. Do you think he'd allow her?"

He glared malignantly at the dead face, so incongruously remote from all that was being said. It was impossible to believe that so much power had resided in this small peaked and twisted thing, with its sunken O-shaped gap of a mouth, round which moustache and whiskers sprouted in foolish disarray, irrelevant, more like fluff from a sweeper fallen on the face than those tremulous appendages of yesterday, bristling with life like quivering enraged antennæ. What was left of Matt Baidon was a tiny, shrunken, pathetic, little old doll, with a body of rags, and a carven knob for a head. It could not be thought of as having been ever grudging or splenetic or subject to any sort of human feeling. The secret held by those ruined features, those frozen, half-lidded eyes, was something so far within, so deep down, as to be beyond understanding. Death, that brings majesty to so many, crossed Matt Baidon out and made him null.

"Well," Ellis said. "We've looked at him long enough. You haven't reported yet, doctor? Of course you haven't. You've had no time. Where's the station?"

"Half a mile out. Help me pick him up, will you? We can't leave him here."

"We must, till the police surgeon sees him."

"I'm the police surgeon."

"Good for you. We'll have to get someone else for the autopsy, though."

"I'll do it—if you insist on this tomfool nonsense."

"Beg pardon, doctor. But you can't."

"Why not?"

"You're an interested party. For all I or anyone else knows, you may have effected the happy release yourself. Now, now! Don't bristle at me. I can't help myself. I've got to run this side of the thing in my way. You run your side of it in yours. I'd say the same if I'd found Gilkie here with him."

Dr. Carter controlled himself with a mighty effort. He looked at Ellis, his great shoulders squared. Unconcernedly, Ellis stooped, and caught Matt under the knees.

"Take his shoulders, will you? That's it. Upsy daisy. Where are we going to put him?"

"Joan's room. She'd better sleep with her mother."

"Hardly worth taking him upstairs, is it? They'll be here for him in an hour or two."

"Nowhere down here to put him."

"Gilk—nip up ahead, and see if the coast's clear. We don't want them to see this."

The stairs were narrow and twisting. A minute landing, no more than a corner, was so filled with books that they had a job to brush past. In the small, dark space, Carter looked enormous. He grunted with the sheer difficulty of getting his bulk along. Matt was no weight at all.

"Here you are."

They edged in a door into a little, severe white room. The iron bedstead was narrow. An old counterpane, so often washed it had lost its whiteness, was not large enough to hide the bed's forbidding outline.

"Pull it down, Gilk."

Gilkison hastily slipped back the counterpane, and stood aside as Matt was laid on the bed, and straightened out.

"There."

Ellis drew the counterpane over him. It was like a conjuring trick, there seemed to be nothing underneath. He glanced round the room. This too was full of books. Matt's hobby tyrannised everywhere in his house. A Bonzo puppy on the mantelpiece, a school group, a couple of banal coloured prints, a gaunt dressing-table with two or three small ornaments, were the only things that testified to the girl who occupied the room.

Ellis shook his head. His brow darkened angrily.

"Not much self-expression here."

"I tell you, they were lucky to call their souls their own," cried the doctor fiercely.

"By the way, doctor, who sent for you? There's no phone."

"Joan ran down. I live only three hundred yards away."

"Did she find him?"

"No, thank God. Her mother did."

"Shock to her? Did she need attention?"

"Not immediately. I was going to her, as soon as I'd finished——"

"Go on in now, would you mind? And see if she's fit to answer a few questions."

The doctor made an inarticulate sound. He towered over Ellis.

"I won't have them bullied. You understand?"

"My dear good man. I feel to them as you do. Besides, I never bully anyone—except a bully. It doesn't work."

CHAPTER SIX

FROWNING to himself, Ellis stood on the narrow landing, examining a book. It was dirty, and smelled of damp. He opened it at random, and sank his chin deep in the pink folds of flesh that flowed up to meet it.

"The Tench is unwholesome," he read, "and of hard concoction: it is a muddie and excremental fish, unpleasant to the taste, noysome to the stomach, and filleth the body with gross and slimie humours. Notwithstanding——"

The bedroom door opened, and Dr. Carter came out.

"All right," he growled. "They're ready for you."

Ellis looked up from the book.

"Tobias Venner," he said. "An early colleague of yours. He thought poorly of coarse fish."

He put the open book into Carter's hand, and went to the bedroom, leaving the doctor staring after him.

Rounding yet another tall pile of books, Ellis knocked and went in. Mrs. Baildon and her daughter were sitting together on a small sofa by the window, locked in each other's arms. The first impression he got was of four enormous eyes staring at him. The eyes, and the linked embrace, reminded him of a couple of lemurs. Mrs. Baildon was dead pale, and the hollows round her large eyes were of an unnatural darkness. The girl's

eyes were even bigger; a pair of glasses with thick lenses magnified them to an almost terrifying size, and, whereas her mother's face was blank with shock, she glared at Ellis defiantly.

Ellis met the glare with a calm scrutiny. Joan was thin, tall, and well built, though not quite out of the gawkish age. Her face and body were rigid with tension, as if at any moment she might blaze into violence. The face was a pure oval, and she had a good skin. Ellis decided that, minus the disfiguring glasses, and given proper care and suitable clothes, she would be really good-looking. Her clothes were old-fashioned, and had a shapelessness which suggested that they were originally her mother's, and had been altered in an attempt to fit her slim figure.

There was no tension about Mrs. Baildon. She directed upon Ellis a vague look of mournful enquiry, and did not seem to hear the reassuring formulæ with which he began the conversation.

The girl listened, quivering, and regarding him with animal intentness and hostility. Ellis seated himself casually on the edge of the bed, and swung his short legs.

"So, you see," he concluded, "I must ask you one or two questions. I don't want to distress you; but it will help both Dr. Carter and myself if you'll answer them as clearly as you can."

His manner began to take effect. They relaxed a little. Mrs. Baildon disengaged herself from her daughter's arms. The girl stood up behind her, very straight, a hand on her mother's shoulder.

Before Ellis could question her, Mrs. Baildon took out a handkerchief, and pressed it against her upper lip, rather in the manner of a person trying not to sneeze.

"All those books," she murmured. "I kept warning him. But no, he must stack them up and stack them up. Joan knocked them down once, without meaning to. Didn't you, Joan? And he would have them dusted. He insisted on it. I used to be terrified, climbing up there on a chair, for fear I'd have them over. It was terrible, Mr.—"

"McKay. You remember me, don't you? I came in yesterday."

"Yes. You had to go by on tiptoe, or he'd scream at you that you'd have them over."

"Did everyone know about them? I mean, that they came down easily?"

"If they didn't, it wasn't for want of being told. It was the

first thing he'd say to anyone coming in. Before they were in the room, even."

"Right. Now let's come to to-day. Did anyone call to see him? If I remember rightly, he told us he was expecting someone from New York."

"An American gentleman. Yes, that's right. He came this afternoon, soon after dinner."

"I understood Mr. Baildon to say he was expecting him in the morning? That was why he put us off—Mr. Gilkison and myself."

"Yes, he was. But the American gentleman sent a wire that he couldn't come till the afternoon. Matt was very angry. He likes to rest after his dinner."

"But the American came all right?"

"Yes. About twenty past two. I know, because I generally go and lie down myself then for a bit. I was ill last year, and Dr. Carter said I was to."

She looked at Ellis, on the defensive. Sympathetically, he imagined what Matt's comments must have been.

"An excellent thing, Mrs. Baildon. I had a good nap myself this afternoon."

She did not smile back.

"I waited so as to let him in, and I wondered how long he would keep me, but it was only five minutes after my time."

"Couldn't Miss Baildon have shown him in? Or wasn't she at home?"

The girl gave a stiff jerk, and threw up her head, as if Ellis had accused her of something. Her mother answered for her.

"Yes, Joan was here. But Matt didn't like her to let people in. He said it was my place."

"Well; you let the American in—what was his name, by the way?"

"I don't remember. It was on his card. Stu—something."

"Stuyvesant?"

"Something like that. I gave Matt the card. I dare say it's downstairs there, under all the books."

"We can look for it later. You showed the gentleman in, and went upstairs to rest. Then——?"

"I'd been resting twenty minutes, maybe, or half an hour, and was nearly off, when there was a terrible row. Woke me right up with ever such a jump, it did. Matt was screaming something dreadful. I could hear the American gentleman's voice, trying to calm him down, like; but it was no good. I got up and put on my shoes. I was afraid Matt would have a

fit. I ran down just as the American gentleman was going out of the door. He turned and called back to Matt."

They both looked at Ellis, like amateur actors waiting for the next line. He took the cue.

"Did you hear what he said?"

"Yes. He said, 'All right, Mr. Baildon. But you're not going to get rid of me as easy as that. I'll be back.' That's what he said, didn't he, Joan? 'I'll be back.'"

"Yes. Yes. He said that."

"Where were you, then, Miss Baildon?"

"In the kitchen, putting the things away. Dr. Carter said that mother mustn't stand more than she can help. She sits on a stool by the sink, to wash up, and I dry and put the things away afterwards."

"It hadn't occurred to you to go in and see what all the row was about?"

"If I'd gone in every time father raised a row, I'd have been kept busy. Besides, he'd have bitten my head off. I wasn't curious. It wasn't any business of mine."

"I thought perhaps," Ellis said, "you might have wished to save your mother from coming downstairs."

The girl flushed swiftly.

"As a matter of fact, I did start to wonder if I should go in. I'd come as far as the door, when I heard mother coming. That's how I heard what the American man said."

"Yes. A difficult position for you. Well now, Mrs. Baildon: when you went in to your husband, how did you find him?"

"He was in a dreadful rage. Dreadful."

"More than usual?"

"Oh, yes. I noticed it particularly. Made me afraid for his heart, it did."

Ellis's inner eye gave a twinkle. It seemed to see the promptings of Dr. Carter.

"Generally," Mrs. Baildon went on, "he could settle down at once after one of his tempers. You'd find him quite easy in himself, as if nothing had happened. It used to surprise people."

"Knew how to take care of himself, eh?"

"He did that," said the girl, her mouth in a hard line.

"But this time it was different?"

"Yes. He was all of a twitch and a tremble; quite out of himself, like."

"Did he tell you what had happened to upset him so much?"

"He told me a whole long rigmarole of a story. It seems the

American gentleman had a letter of introduction to him, from Sir George Tweedy. He knew about some of Matt's books, and there were three or four he particularly wanted to see. Matt made me get them out this morning, and put them on the little table by his chair. The American gentleman looked at them, and then he offered to buy them. For some reason this made Matt furious, and he told him to go then and there. I couldn't see what was wrong, myself: but that's what Matt told me."

For the first time, Ellis felt a twinge of sympathy for the deceased.

"But then," Mrs. Baidon went on, "Matt was always unreasonable. You could never tell what would set him off."

Ellis nodded.

"What did you do then, Mrs. Baidon?"

"I tried to calm him down, but he swore at me, so I thought best to let him be. I was too sort of roused up to rest any more, so I went up and put on my things to go and do a bit of shopping. I put my head in before I went out, just to see if Matt was all right."

"Was he?"

"Oh yes. He was reading a book, just as if nothing had happened."

Joan looked down at her mother, who at once looked up, either from a pressure of the hand on her shoulder, or because of the sympathy between them. Mrs. Baidon gave an uneasy cough. Ellis saw that the girl was afraid her mother was blurring the impression of wild derangement Dr. Carter had been anxious for him to receive.

"And then you went shopping?" Ellis prompted her.

"Yes. I always do my week-end shopping on a Friday."

"Is it a very slow business, shopping here?"

Mrs. Baidon looked blank.

"Slow——?"

"I understand from Dr. Carter that you haven't been in very long. Would your shopping normally take you the whole afternoon?"

"Not the shopping wouldn't. I didn't take more than half an hour. But I went to see a friend, and then I looked in on Martha—that's my elder sister—and had a cup of tea with her. I didn't leave her, not till a quarter to five."

"How far off does she live?"

"I couldn't rightly say. Not far."

"About six or seven minutes' walk," Joan interrupted, "if you go by the back way."

The ghost of a flicker passed over Mrs. Baildon's face.

"Is that by the little gate at the side?" Ellis asked.

"No. There's another small gate in the back wall, down past the gooseberry bushes. It opens on a footpath to the village."

"How long were you with your friend, Mrs. Baildon—the one you went to before visiting your sister?"

"I didn't really notice. About half an hour, I think; not longer."

"May I have her name and address, please? I'm sorry to seem so inquisitive; but we have to check up on these things."

Mrs. Baildon hesitated and looked up appealingly at her daughter.

"I'm sure Miss Jenkinson wouldn't want to be mixed up in any unpleasantness," she said faintly.

"As a friend of yours," Ellis said, "she'll be only too glad to help you. That's all I want of her: confirmation of what you have told me."

"I can't see what you're doing here," the girl burst out, her eyes dark and enormous behind the lenses. "We've done nothing wrong. Even father hadn't—not against the law, that is. I can't understand what's brought you here."

"Chance. Pure chance. And Mr. Gilkison."

Mrs. Baildon flushed.

"I don't see what call Mr. Gilkison had to bring a detective in on us," she said. "We had always served him quite polite. Even Matt had, as near as he could come to it."

"He didn't bring me in as a policeman, Mrs. Baildon. He brought me because I'm interested in books. I'm on holiday."

"If you're on holiday," Joan said, "why can't you go away and leave us alone?"

"Miss Baildon. Innocent people have nothing to fear from the law. Why do you imagine I'm working against you? You ought to be glad that someone who represents the law is here to look after you."

The girl looked disconcerted for a moment, but rallied fiercely.

"Inspector Bradstreet would look after us all right. He knows us."

"Inspector Bradstreet? You haven't got an inspector in West Nattering, surely?"

"He belongs to Compton Royal, but he comes from here. He still lives at the end of the village. He's often been in to see us."

"Fond of books, eh?"

"I wouldn't say that. He used to come in to look things up. Father had some books here which they haven't got in the library. Not even at Exeter."

"I can well believe it. Right you are, Miss Baildon: don't worry. You'll soon have your friend here to look after you. He'll see to it that I don't do you any harm."

He grinned at her cheerfully. She coloured again, then flung up her chin at him.

"I've seen you before," she blurted out. "Aren't you Mr. McKay?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Ellis McKay—the composer?"

For the first time, Ellis looked out of countenance.

"I have written one or two things, yes. But——"

"I saw you conduct your West Highland Rhapsody in Exeter, in the spring of last year."

Ellis grinned, to cover his confusion.

"The 'cellos made a muck of that entry in the scherzo, didn't they? Pity you didn't hear it at Bath. Like music?"

She looked at him, refusing to be deflected.

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you doing your proper work?"

"I have to earn my living. If I depended on music, my wife and small boy would have a very thin time of it. I'd have to pot-boil, or teach. No: I prefer this. It keeps me honest, and I can write what I want."

She was still staring at him.

"I can't understand how anyone who can write what you can could go poking about asking questions and ferreting out all sorts of nastiness."

"Let's hope there's no nastiness to ferret out this time," said Ellis heartily. "Just give me Miss Jenkinson's address, will you, please? And your aunt's. Then we can get on."

Mother and daughter looked at each other. Joan spoke.

"Two, Borough Cottages," she said unwillingly.

"That's Miss Jenkinson's. And your aunt's?"

"The Cedars, Hill Lane."

"Good." Ellis wrote this down. "Miss Jenkinson shan't be scandalised. I'll use all my tact. Mr. Gilkison says I haven't any, but he's a liar. However. Mrs. Baildon—I've only a couple more questions for you. Can you tell me what happened after you came back? You did use the back way, didn't you?—the quick one? Good."

"I put the things on the kitchen table, and went in to see how Matt was. Then——"

"You saw what had happened. I know this is very painful and difficult for you: but can you *possibly* remember what you did next?"

"I got to the foot of the stairs, and called for Joan. She didn't answer. I went to the back door, and called again. The second time I called, she came."

"Where was she?"

"In the garden. She often sits down there, to work at her lessons."

"Yes?"

"I told her what had happened, and said she wasn't to go in, but to fetch Dr. Carter at once. She ran off, and then I came over queer, and came upstairs."

"Splendid, Mrs. Baildon. That's all quite clear. Thank you so much. Now, Miss Baildon: your turn. You've told us about the row between your father and the American. What did you do after that?"

"I went down to the bottom of the garden, and took a chair out of the summer-house."

"How long were you there?"

"All the time."

"What—till your mother called you?"

"Yes," the girl answered definitely. "Except for about ten minutes, that is."

"Were you working all the time?"

"No. I had a bit of sewing to do, and I was reading the paper. We get it from a neighbour after he has finished with it. Father was too mean to buy one. The neighbour—Mr. Pawle is his name—leaves it in of an afternoon. He saw me over the hedge, and called to me, and handed it to me. You can ask him, if you want to."

"Thanks. And the ten minutes when you weren't in the garden?"

"I remembered that I'd forgotten to tell mother we were out of petit beurre biscuits. Father always would have them. So I ran down to Stevens' to get them."

"About what time was that?"

"I don't know, exactly. Some time after four, I think."

"Didn't you have any tea?"

"I kept a biscuit, and ate a few gooseberries."

"Joan doesn't take tea," her mother put in. "Or coffee. Do you, Joan? Only cold water."

"Not like me," Ellis said. "I take both by the bucket. But what about your father? Didn't you have to get him his tea?"

"Father didn't have afternoon tea. He'd have his at half past six, or seven."

"I see. So, apart from the few minutes it took you to go to Stevens' and get the biscuits, you were in the garden the whole time?"

Her chin came up again.

"Yes, I was."

"And you heard nothing unusual?"

"Nothing at all."

"If anyone had come in by the front way, would you have seen?"

"Not unless I'd been looking out particularly. There's just one place where you can see a person's feet through the bushes."

"You wouldn't hear the gate, because it doesn't latch. Would you hear the front door?"

"No. It was open. That's the arrangement we always make when mother's out. If any tradesmen call, they leave whatever it is inside the door, at the foot of the stairs."

"What about the side gate? Would you know if anyone came in there?"

"No. It's on the far side of the house."

"Does it lead to the back door, or the front?"

"Either. If it was a tradesman, he'd go to the front. They all know."

"They wouldn't all know when your mother goes out, surely?"

"On a Friday afternoon, they would."

"But that's the day she does her shopping. Why should they call then?"

"I didn't say any did call. But they sometimes do."

"They don't start the afternoon round till about half-past three," Mrs. Baildon said. "Sometimes, when I've given an order, they pop it on the van to save me carrying it."

"I see. You'd be too far away, Miss Baildon, to hear the books come down?"

"I *didn't* hear them."

"Then you can't give us any light at all on what happened?"

She shrugged, and tightened her lips.

"Father had an accident. What else can have happened?"

"That's what I'm trying to establish, Miss Baildon. We policemen are not allowed to take anything for granted. It makes things very wearisome for us. Now—just a couple

more questions, and we're through. Do either of you know if Mr. Baildon had been writing to any London bookseller?"

The question produced a definite effect. It seemed to alarm them both, and to make them wary: to set them back in their first defensive attitude of suspicion. Only from the suddenness of the relapse did Ellis realise how far he had succeeded in thawing them out.

They looked at each other in silence. Mrs. Baildon wet her lower lip with her tongue before replying.

"No," she said carefully, "I don't think so. But we wouldn't see all his letters."

"I understand from Dr. Carter that he had been upstairs a matter of three weeks. Any letters he wrote during that time you would have posted for him?"

They looked at each other again, with obvious relief.

"Not all," Mrs. Baildon said. "He was very close, was Matt. If he didn't want us to see a letter, he'd give it to Mrs. Exworthy, or anyone that called in. Even if he had to keep it in his pocket for days."

"Mrs. Exworthy? Who's she?"

"The woman who comes in twice a week to clean. She and Matt got on fine."

"She wouldn't tell us, whatever it was," Joan corroborated. "She loves having something secret to spite us. She often hints at things she knows and we don't."

"An attractive character. I look forward to meeting her."

"You won't get much out of Jane Exworthy," said Mrs. Baildon with conviction.

"I can but try. Who else would come in? You said he might have visitors."

"Old Treweek," the girl said scornfully. "Or Mr. Rawlings."

"That's the vicar," said her mother.

"Or Mr. Pawle. If he'd given Mr. Rattray anything, Mr. Rattray would have told us."

"Treweek. The vicar. Mr. Pawle. Mr. Rattray." Ellis put down the names. "Excuse the question, Mrs. Baildon: but the impression I get on all hands is that your late husband was not exactly a popular figure. Yet, when he's ill, he has a number of callers. How's that?"

Mrs. Baildon looked at Joan, as if the question was beyond her.

"They didn't call because they liked him," the girl said. "Old Treweek may have, because he's just such another. But, you see, father was somehow necessary to a lot of people

because of his books. It wasn't affection that brought people."

"He didn't object to being made use of? Didn't he see through these visits?"

"He saw through them right enough, but it made him proud to think they had to come to him. He could crow over us better afterwards."

"There was another side to it, Joan," Mrs. Baildon said.

"Yes." The girl's colour deepened again. "People came and put up with father's rudeness for our sake. To take him off our hands a bit. That's why Mr. Rawlings came. And Mr. Rattray. Father would send for him sometimes, making wise to discuss how I was getting on with my work, but it was only pretence, because he didn't know the first thing about it."

"Mr. Rattray has been coaching Joan with her Latin," explained Joan's mother.

"Then, any one of those people, except Mr. Rattray, might have posted a letter for him."

"They might. But he was so secretive, he probably wouldn't trust it to anyone but old Treweek."

"You say any of them might have called to see him. Can you remember if any of them did? During the past week or ten days?"

Mrs. Baildon looked helplessly at Joan.

"I can't, to be sure. You see, the door was open, and they'd walk straight up."

"Mr. Rawlings came," the girl said. "And Mr. Pawle."

"Well—we can look into that later. Now—yes—the letter to Mr. Gilkison: did either of you see that?"

"I don't remember," Mrs. Baildon answered. "But we knew he was coming. Matt warned us."

"Warned you?"

"So that we'd be ready, and have the books dusted, and so on."

"I see." Ellis got off the bed. "Well, thank you very much, both of you. You've given me a very clear picture of the whole position, and I needn't bother you any more for this evening." He glanced out of the window. "I think I'd stay up here for a while, if I were you."

"Dr. Carter said they would be coming to—to fetch Matt away," Mrs. Baildon said faintly.

"Yes. As soon as possible. Do you want to see him, before they do?"

She stared in front of her. Her eyes slowly filled with darkness; her face became vivid and concentrated, and a muscle worked in her jaw.

"No," she said, with an extraordinary intensity. "I don't want to see him."

Joan took a quick step forward, and put her hand on her mother's shoulder. The room was electric with suppressed passion. Ellis went to the door, then stopped and looked around. He rubbed his chin with his forefinger.

"There's just one thing. I take it there's no reason why Mr. Gilkison shouldn't carry on with the work he was called to do? After all, the books are your inheritance. They represent a great deal of money—more than enough to take you to Oxford, Miss Baildon. It will be well to have them valued."

"I shan't rest till every one of them is cleared out of the house," Mrs. Baildon said vehemently.

"Don't be in too much of a hurry, though. You want to get the best price you can. I knew a woman who sold her brother's books to a local chap who offered her tuppence a book for the lot. She lost hundreds of pounds. Don't you worry, though," as the woman's face wavered. "Gilkie's the man to look after you. An honest, more scrupulous man never sewed a button on his own pants. What's more, he knows his business backwards."

"Matt always said he wasn't such a fool as he looked. Oh—I——"

"High praise, Mrs. Baildon. High praise. And very true. Well—good-night to you both. Take it easy, now. Dr. Carter will give you something to make you sleep."

He went out, aware of their eyes as they stared uncertainly after him; and closed the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IT WAS ten past nine. The western glory still reached high overhead, the air was mild, and the trio that sat round a metal table at the far end of the inn's small garden felt no chill from the grass and the deep hedge behind.

A good deal had happened in the interval. Matt Baildon's body had been removed, and a small assembly of gapers had been sharply addressed by Ellis and dispersed. Gilkison, who had been methodically picking up and sorting the scattered books, had been retrieved, and the pair had returned to the inn, whence Ellis had rung up Scotland Yard, and,

after a long parley, had been formally put in charge of the investigation.

He and Gilkison then had dinner. Gilkison was full of questions and rather resentful. On the way back to the Plume of Feathers, Ellis had waved a podgy preoccupied hand and shut him up. He would say nothing at dinner either, maintaining that the walls had ears, and exasperating Gilkison more than usual by his complacent air of superior wisdom.

While they were having coffee, the waitress, round-eyed, announced Inspector Bradstreet.

Ellis sprang up, and hailed him with hearty goodwill. The Inspector was obviously pleased by the warmth of the greeting, but it soon appeared that he needed no careful handling. He had a broad, honest countryman's face, and spoke with a pleasant Devon burr.

"Waitress—a pint for Inspector Bradstreet, please. Gilk? No? Fie. And another for me. Please."

"Thank you, I'm sure." Bradstreet mopped his brow. "I'm more than glad you're here to take charge," he said. "This sort of thing may be meat and drink to you: but we don't care for it hereabouts, I must say."

Ellis guffawed.

"Don't know that I relish it myself, Inspector. I came down here for a rest."

"Oh well. 'Twill be a pleasure to work with you. And we don't yet know that 'tis anything, after all."

"Dr. Carter would like us to believe that it isn't."

Bradstreet's face clouded.

"I do hope, for the sake of those two poor souls, that there's no scandal. They've had a heavy cross to bear, a heavy cross."

They fell silent as the girl came with the beer.

"I'd be the last man to want to add to their troubles," Ellis said, as soon as she had gone. "But we have our job to do, Inspector, even though it isn't always a pleasant one."

"No." The Inspector sipped his beer. "It has its awkward side, sometimes."

"You'll agree, I think, that on the face of it there's something to look into?"

"Yes. Yes," Bradstreet said slowly. "Yes. I reckon I would."

"If you'd been on your own here, you'd have thought twice about Dr. Carter's view that it was an accident?"

"Would I now." Bradstreet looked at him thoughtfully.

"I dare say I should. If only because I'd be so anxious for it to be an accident, I'd be a bit suspicious of myself, like."

Ellis nodded approval.

"Now, Inspector—you know the house. You know how those books were stacked up. Did it strike you that everybody was in such perpetual dread of their tumbling down as they're all trying to make out?"

"The old man used to mention it, certainly," Bradstreet said. "But then, he created a good deal, about all sorts."

"You see, I look at it like this. You've all had the idea dinned into you that those books would fall if anyone so much as sneezed. Tishoo, tishoo, all fall down. You've got accustomed to the idea. So, when the books *do* fall—at a time when no one belonging to the house is there to see how or why they fall—you're none of you surprised. You accept readily that the thing you were prepared for has happened at last. To me, coming in fresh from outside—and knowing something you don't know—to me the whole thing naturally looks a bit different. I've no expectations. Gilkie here, having been to the house before, and heard the story, inclines to the accident theory. I merely see the objections to it."

Bradstreet lit his pipe. "What are they, then, Mr. McKay, in your view?"

"First," Ellis said, "there's the position of the chair."

He repeated what he had pointed out to the doctor, demonstrating it on the table with an indiarubber and a box of matches. Bradstreet, watching, nodded placidly as he finished.

"There were several books on the seat of the chair," Gilkison put in, with sudden excitement. "Doesn't that look as if they'd been put there afterwards? I mean, if the books knocked him out of his chair, *and* the blow at the same time sent the chair all that distance from the shelves, no books could have fallen on it *after* he'd been knocked down: and they couldn't have fallen on the seat *until* he'd been knocked down."

"We can't rely on that," Bradstreet answered him good-humouredly. "Suppose he'd been leaning forward, and a few books fell between his back and the back of the chair. Then, as soon as he'd fallen out of the chair, they might slip down on to the seat. No. We can't rely on that. 'Tis a good thought, though," he added, as Gilkison's face reddened in disappointment.

Ellis was waiting to go on.

"Next," he said, "we're asked to believe that the very man who was always screaming and making a fuss about the

danger of the books coming down is the one to forget all about it and bump his wheel-chair into the shelves. It doesn't make sense."

"No," Bradstreet admitted. "That's a point, I allow. But there again, you can't be sure. We don't even know that he was sitting in his chair when he was struck. He may have risen up out of it, to get a book, and then, being weak after so long upstairs, he may have slipped and fallen against the bookshelves."

"In that case, wouldn't you expect to find him close underneath them, instead of six or seven feet away?"

"In the natural course of things, you would," Bradstreet agreed cautiously. "But there again, he may have been knocked staggering, before he fell over."

"True. But"—Ellis seemed to rise and swell in his chair—"I've a third point, which disposes of that argument, and makes me dead certain the thing wasn't an accident."

"You have?"

"Yes. Gilkison will know what I mean."

"I?" Gilkison expostulated. "I've no idea."

"Then you damned well ought to have. You were there."

"I was there?"

"Yes. It happened under your nose. Inspector—even if Matt Baidon had bumped his chair into the shelves—even if he'd stood up and fallen against them—the books wouldn't have come down. When I came into the room yesterday afternoon, I tripped and only saved myself from going for six by catching hold of that bookshelf. I fell with my full weight against the thing, and only rocked it. I weigh thirteen stone ten: pretty well twice as much as Matt. Well, gentlemen—what about it?"

He sat back in triumph, and beamed at them. Bradstreet nodded gently.

"Ah," he said, "that's a good one, I allow. You don't reckon, now, that you weakened the structure, like, so that it came down next day at a touch?"

Ellis started, and gazed at him in dismay. Then he threw back his head, and uttered a roar of laughter.

"Inspector—you're a man after my own heart. It's going to be a joy to work with you." He narrowed his eyes, and leaned forward. "I'll put you a question you can't slide out of. Come now: answer me honestly. Taking the thing all round—plus the fact that it happened when it did—does it *smell* to you like an accident?"

Bradstreet did not answer at once. He took his pipe out,

looked into the bowl, prodded the tobacco with his finger, replaced the pipe, and took a puff or two.

"No," he said at last. "Since you put it to me like that, I can't claim it does. Not that I have any great experience of such things."

"But, like myself, you have an instinct that tells you when something's wrong?"

"That may be. But it don't do to trust to anything like that. Not where a life may be in the balance."

"I agree. But it is valuable, all the same, in telling one when to have a good look. When you get a really strong feeling like that about a case, you don't disregard it, I'll bet."

"I didn't say I had a strong feeling about this case," objected Bradstreet.

"That's not what I asked you. I asked you what you did when you *had* a strong feeling about a case."

"It doesn't happen often," Bradstreet said. He leaned back, blew a couple of smoke rings, and watched them rise in the still air. "I remember a case once; nothing big, a matter of petty theft and an anonymous letter or two, but awkward, because 'twas at a vicarage. The evidence pointed one way clear enough, but I had the feeling all the time that 'tweren't so. It came on me so bad one night, I couldn't sleep."

He said this open-eyed, as if it were a major disaster.

"I got up, and took a walk round about—it was full moon, clear as day—and caught the girl posting a letter in the pillar box. And no one had so much as looked at her. Well, you know; there'd have been a very bad miscarriage of justice, only for that."

"I've a friend who's a doctor," Ellis said. "He has made a great name for himself in diagnosis, and in research. He tells me that all his best shots have been intuitive, and he's built his reputation by checking on 'em rigorously in the laboratory."

Bradstreet nodded.

"That's what we have to do," Ellis went on. "I'm plumb sure this wasn't an accident. (So are you, deep down inside, though you won't admit it.) All right," as Bradstreet began a soft rumble of protest. "What we have to do is to check up fully on everybody and everything to do with the business. It's going to be damned hard, and we shall be obstructed at every step."

He waited for Bradstreet to object, but the Inspector placidly sucked his pipe.

"We'll be obstructed," Ellis went on, "because nobody wants to believe it was murder, or to find the murderer if it was. Nobody cares a damn about Matt. They all think it good riddance to bad rubbish."

"I must say I agree with them," Gilkison put in, his precise voice sounding thin and comical after the deep softness of Bradstreet's. "This is an occasion, if you'll pardon my saying so, when your activities seem out of place: positively mischievous, in fact. An unpleasant old man is removed, who was a plague to his wife and daughter and to everyone else. No one is a penny the worse, and those directly concerned are very much the better. Why not leave it at that?"

Ellis grinned. "Most immoral. Isn't he, Inspector? Undermining the entire structure of British justice."

"British justice would get on a good deal better if you left her alone," Gilkison said acidly. "If she's so anxious to reach the guilty party, she can be trusted to provide plenty of evidence that points towards him. If she hasn't troubled to do so, it's probably for a very good reason. You're not called upon to go nosing about on her behalf."

"That'd be all right if this female personification of yours weren't so capricious. *Vide* Oscar Slater, and other unfortunates to whom she took a dislike. No, Gilk. You can't dispose of us in that glib and unethical manner. We, having no prejudices——"

"Only intuitions," Gilkison cut in sarcastically.

"Five points to you." Ellis bowed. "But only debating points, and in the school debating society at that."

"——plus a commercial interest in securing a conviction."

"No points at all. Mere vulgar abuse."

"Can you possibly maintain that the police are never influenced by the desire to obtain a conviction?"

"Can you possibly maintain that booksellers never misrepresent their wares? But you wouldn't like being lumped in with the black sheep and having dishonesty imputed to you as a trade motive. Would he, Inspector?"

"My dear Ellis, I wasn't speaking personally."

"My dear Gilkie, we are. While you're babbling about Justice, and other agreeable generalisations, we are considering how Inspector Bradstreet and Detective Inspector McKay shall conduct our joint investigation of the circumstances surrounding the demise of an unlovely old codger named Matt Baidon, which occurred in his own front room at some unspecified hour this afternoon."

"It was you who began generalising," Gilkison said,

offended, "and talking about intuition and doctors and so forth."

"Did I? Well, I've stopped. Now, Inspector"—Ellis leaned forward—"this seems to me essentially the sort of case where we have to get a general picture of the situation before we begin. On the accuracy of that picture the whole thing may depend."

Bradstreet nodded.

"For a period of close on two hours and a half the old man is left alone in his front room. Alone in the house, if we can believe his wife and daughter. At any time during those two hours and a half, anyone at all can have entered the house and got at him. Damn it, the thing's wide open. It couldn't have been wider open if it had been deliberately arranged; as in all probability it was."

"How long did Dr. Carter reckon the old man had been dead?" Bradstreet asked. "That should narrow the time down a bit."

"He couldn't say: or he wouldn't. Said the day was so warm, and the room so stuffy, and the body so muffled up with clothes and covered with books, he couldn't be definite within an hour or so."

"Sounds reasonable enough."

"We're not going to get any help from Dr. Carter. It's as well to be clear on that point."

"That's because——" Bradstreet began, and broke off.

"Because he thinks, if it's proved not to be an accident, suspicion will most naturally fall on Baildon's wife and daughter."

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that. He wants the whole thing hushed up, for fear of hurting them."

"We can't exclude the possibility that he did it himself." Ellis watched to see how Bradstreet would react, but the countryman did not bat an eyelid.

"I had thought of that, of course," he said. "But I don't reckon 'tis likely."

"Because he'd know suspicion might fall on them? I agree. If he'd meant to do it, I think he'd have provided them with a proper alibi. Packed 'em off together for the afternoon where there'd be a hatful of witnesses."

"He might do. He's a bit of an impulsive sort, is Dr. Carter. Been in more than one police court case, years back, over losing his temper. Violent, like."

"Not the sort to do in a helpless old boy in a chair, you mean. Much less to plan it."

"You take my meaning very quick," Bradstreet said.

"Still, we can't eliminate him. Now; what we want, first of all, is evidence of any callers at the house during those two hours and a half. And I doubt very much if we'll get it."

"Be lucky if we do."

"Failing that, we want a full list of anyone who might have had occasion to call. It will be up to them to prove they didn't."

Bradstreet nodded again.

"We want tabs on our American friend. The two women, by the way, were very anxious to sell me the point that he said he'd come back. Almost as anxious as they were about the liability of the books to fall."

"People often behave in a suspicious way when they're scared or upset. I've noticed it scores of times."

"So have I. But, if you'll excuse my saying so, there you go again. Everyone's up in arms to defend those two. Damn it, we'd hardly get a murder verdict here if he'd had a knife stuck between his shoulder blades."

Bradstreet smiled peacefully.

"I'm glad you realise you may not get one, Mr. McKay."

"I bloody well know I won't—unless something turns up in the meantime."

"That's all right, then."

The brown eyes twinkled suddenly, and Ellis laughed.

"Well, as I said, we must get tabs on our American. I think he's neither here nor there, but that doesn't matter. Then there's another bloke; a friend of Gilkie's here. Tell the Inspector, Gilk."

Gilkison started indignantly.

"Nothing of the kind. I have no sort of dealings with the fellow. He's a known rogue."

Bradstreet twinkled again, and sucked his pipe.

"Who is this, Mr. Gilkison?"

Still indignant, Gilkison told him of Nelder's presence in the inn the day before, and of his belief that it must in some way be connected with Matt Baidon.

"We'll rope in Nelder," Ellis said, "and find out first, if we can, whether the estimable Matt gave any of his bedside callers a letter for him. One Treweek, his daughter said, is the likeliest."

"You'll be lucky if you get any truth out of him," the Inspector remarked.

"Perhaps we can scare him."

"I've seen more than one Petty Sessions try, and come short of it."

Ellis grunted, and pulled out his pocket book.

"I've got a list of people here—for God's sake, Gilk, sit still. Have you got St. Vitus' Dance? What are you slapping and flapping at?"

"Midges," said Gilkison shortly.

"You should smoke, and keep them off. Puff at him, Inspector."

"No, thank you," Gilkison said hastily. "I shall go in in a minute."

"Stern duty keeps us at our post. You, of course, may abandon us if you choose."

"That's all very well. They don't bite you."

"They know better. They don't visit the Inspector either."

"I can't say they trouble me," Bradstreet smiled. "Some find them very vexatious, I know."

"Here's the list. Mrs. Exworthy, who comes in twice a week to clean. Mrs. Baildon gave me to understand she was likely to resemble old Treweek. We can but try. Treweek, aforesaid. Mr. Rawlings, the vicar."

"I shouldn't hardly suspect him," smiled Bradstreet.

"Not of bumping the old boy off. But he may have posted a letter. Mr. Pawle. Who's he?"

"An old retired gentleman, interested in Spiritualism and the British Israelites."

"Bradstreet—you're a gem. A perfect miniature biography. I can see we shall get nothing from Mr. Pawle. If Matt did give him a letter, he'd be far too honourable even to look at the envelope. The last on my list is Mr. Rattray, who I understand coaches Joan Baildon in Latin. What about him?"

The Inspector considered before replying.

"Rattray? He's a very decent, pleasant spoken young fellow. A bit on the serious side. Headmaster of the boys' grammar school, runs Scouts and Sunday school classes. Has an invalid wife."

"Another perfect cameo. Inspector, your talents are wasted here. Does he push her about in a bath chair?"

"Yes. Have you met him?"

"I saw a chap this morning who'd fit in with your account." He told Bradstreet how he had spent the morning.

"He's a possibility, then," Ellis said. "Though it's less likely, if he was passing in the morning. Anyone else? Any regular visitor that you know of?"

"I don't know the family as closely as all that," said Bradstreet. "I haven't been in more than two or three times in the past twelvemonth."

"Got an alibi yourself?" Ellis grinned at him.

"Good enough, I reckon." Bradstreet's eyes gleamed back with pleasure. "There's one other person might be on the list, though. I don't suppose old Baildon would ask her to post a letter for him, nor she do it if he did."

"Who's that?"

"Miss Caunter, from the girls' school. Miss Eunice Caunter. She takes a great interest in Joan Baildon, and has been helping her with her work for the last couple of years. The maid's clever," Bradstreet went on, "but her eyes have kept her back. You'll have noticed they're weak."

"Partly due to neglect, I'm told."

"So I believe. Miss Caunter has always taken the maid's part, and had more than one row with the old man. One time, he forbade her the house. But he had the sense to see he was getting something for nothing: so——"

"She didn't charge for her services, then?"

"Nothing, I believe. And he couldn't stop Joan from seeing her at the school, so he suffered the extra lessons to go on. Most times, though, Joan used to go down to Miss Caunter's place."

"Used to go?"

"I gather she hasn't been so often since Mr. Rattray started to coach her. After all, she hasn't a great deal of time. She's still at school."

"Does Rattray also work for love?"

"That I couldn't say."

"I'm glad to find something you can't say. You who pretend you don't know much about the family. What's it like when you really claim to know?"

Bradshaw smiled, and did not reply. Gilkison got up.

"I can't stand this any longer. I'm going in."

"Polite, isn't he?"

"You know perfectly well I'm alluding to the midges."

"Well—we'll come in too. One had the sauce to bite me just now."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE division of labour agreed upon for the next morning was that Bradstreet should see to the tracing of the American, Mr. Stuyvesant, and of Nelder, and should set enquiries in motion as to whether anyone had been seen to enter or emerge from the Baidons' house during the crucial two hours and a half. Meanwhile, Ellis should see to what he was pleased to call the psychological side of the case, and interview the people on the list given him by Joan Baildon.

Bradstreet suggested one exception, whom they might see together.

"Old Treweek," he said. "I don't reckon he'll say anything at all to you. He won't believe in you. But he knows me; and between us we ought to be able to make him talk."

"Would the same apply to Mrs. Exworthy?"

"Nothing won't apply to she," Bradstreet grinned, lapsing for the moment into broad dialect.

"Let's leave her for later, then. Gilk—I'd like you with me when I interview the schoolmistress. And, possibly, the vicar. You give a bogus air of respectability to the proceedings."

"I thought you wanted me to get on with the books. After all, they're my job. And I can't stay here indefinitely."

"You may have to value the lot. You heard Mrs. Baildon say she wanted to sell."

"Impossible. It would take me a couple of weeks. Besides, if she wants to sell, I feel a delicacy about valuing them. I may want to buy quite a number myself."

"Delicacy be damned. You can always advise her to have an independent valuation of what you intend to buy."

"Really, Ellis. You might trust me to be aware of the elementary usages of my job."

"Don't talk so much. Come and lend a hand. If I'd known I was going to work, I wouldn't have worn these clothes."

It was one of Ellis's delusions that he went about his official duties in sober habit. Actually Gilkison could never detect much difference between his various outfits. Some were louder, others were dirtier: that was all.

He forbore to point this out. All Ellis's friends sooner or later forebore to point things out.

"Who are you going to take first?" he asked.

"The schoolmistress," said Ellis.

" May she not be busy ? "

" My good ass. In the first place, it's Saturday, and Saturday is a whole holiday for schools of this type. In the second place, it's half term, as even you must have realised."

" Why ? "

" How else do you suppose Joan Baidon would have been at home on a Friday afternoon ? Use your wits."

" I can think of several possible reasons."

" Never mind 'em. That's the right one. Now—Miss Caunter lives at Honeysuckle Cottage. That's down past the station."

" She may have gone away for the day."

" She hasn't. And I've made an appointment to see her in twenty minutes' time. Any more backchat ? Then put on your hat, and come along like a good lad."

" What about the post-mortem ? " Gilkison asked presently, as he tried to fit his long stride into some relationship with Ellis's quick waddle.

" Starting soon. Police surgeon from Exeter. Carter assisting."

" Is that wise ? "

" Can't stop him. Bradstreet will have tipped his man off, anyhow."

" That seems to me a weakness of your position, Ellis, if I may say so. In so far as anyone is a suspect, Carter is. Yet he's allowed to assist in this business."

" It's only because his position is anomalous that we've been able to take the matter out of his hands. He can't do anything. I don't suppose there's much he could do, anyway."

" When is the inquest to be ? "

" Bradstreet's trying to fix it for Monday."

" Are you going to want me all day, or can I have a go at the books ? "

" Patience. Patience. Where the hell are these cottages ? Bradstreet said down on the left. I'll ask this old cove." Ellis raised his voice to a shout. " I beg your pardon—but can you tell me where Honeysuckle Cottage is ? "

" Eh ? "

The old man put his hand to his ear in so perfectly traditional a manner that both were hard put to it not to laugh.

" Honeysuckle Cottage—where is it ? "

" Yes, my dear."

" No, my dear," said Ellis, sotto voce. He grinned, and pointed down the road.

" Honeysuckle Cottage ? "

The old man amiably surveyed the sky.

"I dare say 'twill," he said.

"Thank you!" Ellis roared in his ear, and left him gazing in a startled fashion after them. "Let's hope that's not a parable of the difficulties we shall have in getting information. I'm rather afraid it is. Local collaboration, nil. Not nice, to feel that everyone's up against you."

"My dear Ellis. I should never have thought you'd mind for an instant."

"Oh, you wouldn't, eh. Let's ask this small boy. Hallo!"

"Ullaw," replied the urchin, unperturbed.

"That's the boy. I began to be afraid everyone here was deaf."

"I bain't deaf."

"So I see. Now—we're looking for Honeysuckle Cottage, where Miss Caunter lives. You know—the schoolmistress."

"Her idn' our schoolmistress."

"Ah. Perhaps not. But do you know where she lives?"

The child pointed with a sticky finger.

"That's of it," he said. "That there little 'ouse with the creepers."

"Grand. Is the creeper honeysuckle?"

"That there's 'Oneysuckle Cottage."

"Thank you."

Ellis gave the boy a penny, and went along, snapping his fingers in high good humour.

"We come to terms with the local mind, Gilk. We find it direct, practical, tenacious, and not to be diverted from the matter in hand. A good augury."

"Particularly if the matter in hand is hushing up the *affaire* Baildon."

"Don't call it an *affaire*. You have the nastiest touch of any man I know. You and your old-maidish prurience. D'you recall what Augustine Birrell said about Gibbon?"

"My dear Ellis——"

"Sssh. We are there. We approach the chaste portals. Compose yourself. Nothing improper here, please."

"I never implied——"

"Be quiet. Pull yourself together. You're looking pink and sulky. Won't do. Copy me. Bland and charming smiles."

He opened the gate, and stumped purposefully up the path. With a sigh, Gilkison followed.

As he neared the door, Ellis saw an infinitesimal movement of the curtain in the front room on the right. There was no bell. He knocked, and the door was opened almost at once.

" Miss Caunter ? "

" Yes. Won't you come in ? "

They followed her, Gilkison stooping to avoid the lintel, into a small, neat, crowded room. Varied and cheap though most of the furnishings were, they gave the impression of a decided personality, which was confirmed by a look at their owner.

* Eunice Caunter was of middle height, with a strong, well developed figure. Her eyes and hair was very dark, and a line of down towards the corners of her upper lip hinted that it might become a nuisance later on. Her complexion was good, her features bold. Somehow, Ellis decided, she just missed being very good looking indeed. And somehow, maybe for the same reason, her feminine curves failed of their full attraction.

Ellis introduced himself and Gilkison, and her voice, as she acknowledged the introduction and asked them to sit down, strengthened the feeling that her appearance had given him. The voice was a deep contralto, but with a thread of harshness that marred its music and robbed it of warmth.

" Cigarette ? "

She offered an elaborate wooden box. A thick, smooth bangle encircled her wrist.

" Neither of us smokes, thank you."

" You don't mind if I do ? "

Ellis held a light for her. She was nervous, and needed the cigarette.

" I've been given the task of enquiring into the circumstances of Mr. Baildon's death, Miss Caunter. I came here for quite another purpose, in my private capacity as a lover of books. Then—this happened."

She drew strongly on her cigarette.

" It was an accident, wasn't it ? " she said.

" We should all like to think so. But I won't conceal from you that there are one or two odd circumstances about it which, in the opinion of Scotland Yard, demand an enquiry."

" That means," she said, puffing between words, " in your opinion, doesn't it ? "

Ellis put a hand on each of his knees. He sat with his thick legs apart, facing her, upright, dogmatic.

" You see, Miss Caunter, the police force of this country has two main duties. The first is to prevent crime. If, in spite of them, a crime occurs, their job is to detect and punish those responsible for it. That means that we are on duty all the time. Our attention is continually being called to a hundred and

one things which on investigation turn out not to be crimes at all. This may be one of them. But, if we didn't look into each and every one, and if in the vast majority of cases we weren't able to reassure people and show that no crime had been committed there would grow up such an atmosphere of uneasiness and suspicion that the public could never feel safe."

"Yes," she said. "I see that."

"Good. Now, in a case like this, we don't want—I'm sure you'll agree with me—we don't want formal police procedure, officers going round upsetting people and making them feel that things are all wrong. What we want is to get hold of a handful of really knowledgeable people on whose good sense we can rely, and have a series of quiet, personal talks with them, so as to find out the facts, and how things stand. And when I say 'the facts,' Miss Caunter, I don't only mean times and places and who did what. I mean the facts of character and personality, of inclination and aversion: the atmosphere of the whole situation. I mean, in a word, the inner as well as the outer reality."

She was listening to him closely. As he paused, she nodded.

"Yes," she said.

"And that, Miss Caunter, is why I come to you. I come to you first of all, before anyone else in the place, because, like myself, you are a professional judge of character. More than that, you know, intimately, the persons concerned in this unfortunate situation. You can give us help that no one else can."

The girl took out her cigarette, eyed it for a moment, squinting a little as she did so, then looked steadily at Ellis.

"What help do you want?" she asked. "What do you want to know?"

"I want a picture of the family. Of their relations to each other and to those around them. You see, Miss Caunter, an outsider, coming in suddenly with no knowledge, will often seize on points which seem full of meaning to him, but which those who are really acquainted with the situation know are quite untypical, and perhaps misleading. I might call on you twice in three years, and each time you might have a cold in your nose. I'd get a picture of you as the girl with a cold in her nose: whereas those might have been the only two colds you'd had in the whole time."

She smiled, as if she felt Ellis expected a smile; but she was still wary. Ellis bent forward.

"Look, Miss Caunter. Mr. Gilkison and I arrive here at an exceptional time in the history of the Baildons. Everyone who lives here is convinced that Mr. Baildon's death must be an accident. We notice one or two things which might point another way. Only someone like yourself, who knows the family closely, can tell us whether these things are fortuitous and right out of the picture—accidental colds in the nose, so to speak—or whether they are regular features of the landscape."

Eunice Caunter took out her cigarette again, and moistened her lips.

"What have you noticed?"

Ellis smiled, and shook his head.

"No, no. That's not the right way round. If we start by focusing attention on them, we shan't see the wood for the trees. Where you can help us best—where you can help the Baildons best—and, believe me, the two things are the same. The police are the allies of an innocent man, not his enemies—where you can help them best is by giving us as full a picture as possible of their family life."

Still she hesitated, and once more squinted down at her cigarette.

"You said the police are the allies of an *innocent* man. Why did you put such an emphasis on the word?"

"Did I?"

"I thought so. Does that mean that Mrs. Baildon and Joan are suspected?"

"My dear Miss Caunter." Ellis grimaced, and spread out his hands. "In a case like this, where no one is suspected, everyone is suspected. We don't know what happened. If a crime was committed——"

"If Mr. Baildon was murdered, you mean."

"If his death wasn't an accident—I prefer to put it that way; there are various degrees before we get to murder—then anyone who could have got into the house might have had a hand in it. Anyone. A tradesman, an errand boy, the doctor, even. You see, it's a ridiculous position. Nobody is suspected, because we have no definite evidence against anybody. Everybody is suspected, until we have definite evidence against somebody. That's why we've come to you; as the best person to clear the ground for us, and start us off. There's no catch in it. The more we know about the whole set-up, the better. You can see that for yourself."

With a decisive movement, she crushed her cigarette in the ash tray.

"It would be very cruel if anyone suspected Mrs. Baildon and Joan. Very cruel, and quite absurd."

Ellis nodded encouragingly.

"For years, that poor woman has slaved to look after him. Joan, too, as soon as she was old enough. Two lives have been sacrificed to the comfort of that old beast: and not a spark of gratitude has either of them got for it. Life in that house has been perfect hell for those two. You can't imagine it."

Her breasts were rising and falling fast under the cherry coloured jumper. Her eyes flashed.

"I can make a pretty good guess," Ellis said. "But that doesn't tell me why it's absurd to suspect them. Rather the reverse."

"Rubbish!" she spat at him. "Mrs. Baildon did everything for that old devil. Got up in the night to fetch him things, coddled him, cosseted him, gave in to him in everything. Joan has more spirit. She'd have fought him back, and told him where he got off. But she held herself in for her mother's sake, as much as she could. Remember, they were absolutely dependent on him, absolutely. Every penny they got they had to ask him for, and have doled out to them, like children. It was monstrous! the law shouldn't allow such things."

The harsh thread in her voice had grown strident. She was breathless with indignation. She sat back, grasping the arms of her chair.

"How they have put up with it all these years, I can't imagine. I would have strangled the old devil long ago. Yes, I would! and I won't mind you hearing me say it, or anyone else. If anyone *did* strangle him, they did a good day's work, and I honour them. That's what I say, and I don't care whether it makes you suspect me or not."

"It won't have that effect," Ellis assured her.

"I shouldn't mind if it did. But, Mr. McKay, they didn't do it. They couldn't. Why should they? If they'd wanted to, why wait till now? They'd had him upstairs in bed for three weeks, and for the first week he was pretty bad. This wasn't the first attack he'd had, either. Surely, if murder had been in their mind, they'd have done it before this, when they had so much better opportunity? If they'd popped him off in his bed, when he was so bad, Dr. Carter would have signed the certificate without a murmur. Well then—why should they wait till yesterday? It doesn't make sense."

Ellis inclined his head.

"I'm glad to hear you say that. You put it very forcibly. Now you see just what I mean, when I said that what we needed was a general picture of the situation, and that you were the best possible person to give it to us."

"Anyone in the village could have told you that much. It's obvious."

"I hope you're going to tell us some more."

"What more do you want to know?"

"More about the family. Mr. Baildon was very old to have a daughter as young as Joan. How old is she? Seventeen? Eighteen?"

"Just eighteen. She's his daughter, all right."

An ugly smile came over her face. Gilkison inwardly recoiled.

"It never occurred to me that she wasn't. Did he marry very late, or was she a long time coming?"

"Both. He didn't want a child. Mrs. Baildon did. She had to have something, poor woman, to make her life endurable. She begged and begged for one. Then—Dr. Carter will be able to tell you more about that than I can."

"Have you any idea why Mr. Baildon did not want a child?"

"Too mean. Knew it would cost money. He's grudged every penny spent on that poor child. Look at her eyes."

"Yes. I heard about that. Had he no sort of affection for her?"

"I'd have said, none whatever."

"For his wife?"

"She was a convenience. I suppose he valued her that much. I don't believe he was capable of affection."

"I understand that, but for the handicap of her sight, Joan would be something of a scholar."

"She *is* a scholar. That child has real ability. She's miles out of the ordinary. If only she'd had a decent chance——It makes me mad, when I think what she could have done, but for that mingey old swine! She could have done anything. She'd have gone flying into Oxford, or anywhere else, with all the scholarships she wanted. As it is, I believe she'll get in. But it's such a shame that she should have to struggle for what's hers by right."

"I understand that you have helped her a great deal, Miss Caunter."

"I've done what I could. I only wish I could have done more."

"And Mr. Rattray, too, has been helping."

The atmosphere changed instantly. The girl receded. She was once more guarded and wary.

"Yes," she said. "I believe he has."

"With her Latin?"

"Yes."

"You don't teach Latin, I gather?"

"Not enough to be of any use. I'd have been glad to work at it with her: but there wasn't the time. And he would be quicker, of course."

"Well," Ellis said heartily, "between the two of you, and her regular work at school, she's getting a grand chance. You're doing all that can be done to redress the unfair balance against her."

"It would take a lot to do that."

"Tell me about this Mr. Rattray."

"What do you want to know about him?"

Her voice was dry, almost cracked. She took another cigarette. Gilkison lit it for her, bending stiffly down. In the low ceilinged room, his height seemed prodigious, and out of scale.

"I'll tell you all I do know about him, and you can supplement it in any way you think necessary. I'm told he's headmaster of the local boys' school, conscientious, serious-minded, takes Sunday school classes, and has an invalid wife."

She smiled bleakly.

"From your smile, I take it that, while all those details are correct, they don't give anything like an accurate portrait."

She tilted her head back, blew a long cloud of smoke, and watched it dissipate.

"I don't know that I am the best person to come to for a portrait of Mr. Rattray," she said.

"Because you are too sympathetic to him, or not sympathetic enough?"

She flushed swiftly and angrily.

"Neither," she snapped. Then, more normally, "At least— No. I don't think——"

"Then——?"

"Only that I think someone else could give you a better picture."

"What is Joan Baildon's attitude towards him?"

She started, and looked sharply at him.

"She's grateful to him, naturally. She has every reason to be. He has taken a lot of trouble, and put up with a great

deal of insult and unpleasantness from the old man. But— Pardon me, I don't at all see the point of your question? What are you trying to get at? "

" Nothing in particular, Miss Caunter. I'm only trying to build up that general picture we spoke about. Everybody's relationship to everyone else."

" I don't think Joan has any particular attitude to him, beyond what is normal in the circumstances."

" Quite. Perfectly." He looked at his notebook. " Just one more thing I want to ask you about Mr. Rattray : which will tell you, by the way, how that question about Joan's attitude came into my mind. This invalid wife of his : what sort is she? "

Eunice Caunter for a moment looked positively venomous.

" If she wasn't the sick creature she is, I'd say she was a perfect bitch. I'm not sure I won't say it anyway."

" Leads him a dance? Trades on her invalidism? "

" Trades on it in every way she can think of. Keeps him by her side morning, noon, and night. Or would like to. She can't always, thank God."

" A jealous type, eh? "

" She has a fit if he as much as looks at anyone else. I've seen her even pretend to be taken ill at a children's Christmas party, so that he'd have to stop enjoying himself and wheel her home."

" Did she by any chance grudge the time he gave to helping Joan with her lessons? "

" Grudge it! that woman would poison the sunshine."

" Joan and Mr. Rattray, then, would have a bond in common. They'd each known what it is like to be domineered over by an invalid. That's what prompted my question just now, about her attitude to him."

She half rose from her chair, glaring like a fury.

" What are you insinuating? " she cried.

" My dear Miss Caunter, you really must not attach these imaginary meanings to my remarks. I want, as I keep telling you, to get as full a picture of the lives of these people as you can give me. I note that Joan Baildon and her tutor have in common that each has an invalid and tyrannical person in the home. It makes so obvious a link that I ask you whether it has any noticeable effect on their relationship with one another. I'm not insinuating anything. You're doing it, if anyone is, by flying off the handle at a simple and straightforward question."

She swallowed down her anger as best she could.

"You'd better ask them," she said. "I'm not to know what they feel about it. How can I know?"

Ellis shrugged.

"It's a reason for them to exchange sympathies. You're Joan's good friend, and in her confidence. She might easily have spoken to you about Mr. Rattray. She must have done, at one time or another."

"I don't see what you're *getting* at," Eunice cried, banging her hand on the arm of her chair. "I don't see what all these questions are *for*. How can anything that Joan feels about D—about Ursula Rattray have anything to do with old Baildon's death?"

"I don't know," Ellis replied blandly. "I don't know what anything has to do with anything, yet. A case like this is like a jigsaw. Before you can start fitting the bits together, you must make sure you've got 'em all. Well—I'm trying to get all the bits. At this stage, I can't possibly know what's relevant and what isn't."

"So you go round asking everyone to betray the confidences which other people have reposed in them."

"You said just now that Joan had not confided in you about her feelings towards Mr. Rattray."

"Nor has she. But *you* said just now that I was her friend, and in her confidence, and that that's why you're questioning me."

Ellis shook his head at her in good-natured sorrow.

"I wish you'd get it out of your head that we're on opposite sides, Miss Caunter. I have no mission to persecute the widow and the fatherless. Everything I have heard inclines me to feel the liveliest sympathy for them. As a policeman and as a private individual, I'm all for them. I hope you'll believe that. It's my maxim that the facts can never harm the innocent, and therefore that the best way to defend the innocent is to unearth every possible fact, no matter where it may seem to point at first."

"It's a little difficult to remember, sometimes." The girl had recovered her poise: she gave him a thin smile. "This idea of the police as one's dear protector is not the first to come to one's mind when they come rushing round suggesting there's been a murder and asking questions."

"I didn't suggest there'd been a murder," Ellis said, jerking his head up abruptly to look at her.

"What else could it be, if it wasn't an accident? Suicide? You ask me to be frank with you, and then go all cautious at me. And I *have* been frank with you, anyway."

"I'm sure you have." Ellis put his notebook away, and stood up. "And I'm very grateful to you for it, Miss Caunter. I'm going to ask you a favour."

He put his head on one side, and eyed her with a smiling appraisal.

"What is it?" She was not giving anything away.

"I'm going to ask, if anything turns up about Joan or her mother that puzzles me, whether I may call in and consult you about it. I'm above all things anxious to do full justice to them. Please believe that."

She looked at him hard for a moment. Then she breathed out in a long sigh, and the tension of her body relaxed.

"All right," she said. "I'm here most evenings."

"Thank you. Oh!" He turned to her again. "There's just one more point. I was forgetting. Joan Baidon's aunt. Let me see, what's her name?"

"Miss Attwill."

"Miss Attwill. What sort is she?"

Eunice looked along her nose at him.

"I think she's rather a tiresome old thing. Cranky, and fancies herself. I'm-as-good-as-you-and-don't-you-forget-it. That sort."

"She's a good deal older than Mrs. Baidon, I understand?"

"Years older," said the girl decisively. "She might be her mother, to look at her. I believe she's very kindhearted," she went on, in an obvious desire to be fair. "She's been very good to Joan, I must say. Lets her go down there to work when the house is too unbearable. Joan's very fond of her, and that's to her credit. At least, I think so."

"Good. Anything else I ought to know about her?"

"If there is, she'll tell you. She never stops talking. She keeps bees, and tells fortunes, and makes cowslip wine. All that sort of thing. You know."

"Splendid," Ellis said, smiling. "That's a very complete picture. I knew I'd be right to come to you first, Miss Caunter, but I didn't realise how right. Thank you so much. Good morning."

"Good-morning."

CHAPTER NINE

"WELL." Gilkison let out the monosyllable in shocked explosion. "Never in my life have I heard anything more utterly disingenuous than your approach to that young woman."

"Seldom," Ellis retorted, "can you have heard anything more utterly disingenuous than her reception of it. In any case, I don't know what you're complaining of."

"The way you turned everything about, to get at her. Trying to trap her into saying something to incriminate those wretched women."

"No, damn it!" Ellis stopped dead. "That I won't take, even from you. Good God! And I always thought you were reasonably intelligent."

"Perhaps I am. And perhaps that's why——"

"Perhaps my foot. Listen, you blasted idiot. Damn it, you'll make me angry in a minute! For sheer nerve——"

Ellis had gone a rich crimson.

"Look here, you miserable huxter. I have no theory, no axe to grind, nothing at all in my head, except the conviction that the old boy was bumped off. I don't know who did it, any more than you do. For their sake and for everyone else's, I devoutly hope it wasn't either of the Baildons. But I'm not going to be such a sentimental bloody fool as to leave them out of the inquiry I'm paid by the State to make. If they're innocent, as I hope, then the more I can find out about 'em the better."

"So you've said twice already."

"All right, all right. It doesn't seem to have made much impression on you."

He started to walk again, and fell in by Gilkison's side.

"I had to make that woman talk, and I went the best way about it."

"I can't see that rubbing her up the wrong way helped you."

"I didn't rub her up the wrong way. She just flew off the handle."

"Sheer Act of God, in fact. Nothing to do with you at all. My dear Ellis. You'll be telling me next how tactful you are."

"Go to hell," said Ellis cheerfully. He had regained his composure. "I ought to know better by now than take any notice of what you say. Tell me: what did you make of her?"

"That question is rather undermined by the sentence before it."

"Yes, yes. But let's have your opinion, even if it isn't worth anything."

"She seemed to me a somewhat emotional young woman," Gilkison said, after a pause.

"Quite. But what were the emotions? And what roused 'em?"

"Well. First of all, she is obviously fond of Joan Baidon."

"Yes."

"She hated the old man."

"Undoubtedly."

"She appears jealous of this Mr. Rattray's giving Joan lessons. Jealous of him altogether, perhaps. Did you notice how angry she became when you asked about Joan's attitude to him?"

"Oddly enough, I did."

"And, at the same time, she appeared to sympathise with him about his wife. That seems a little inconsistent, to me."

"D'you get anything else?"

Gilkison considered. "I can't remember anything."

"Yes, you can. One thing she said made you go all maidenly. You hated it."

"What? I don't——"

"When she said Joan was the old man's daughter. There you are, you see. It disgusted you so much that you've forgotten it. Didn't show a very nice mind, did it?"

"It did not," Gilkison said, with distaste. "She even saw that herself."

"Think she did?"

"Don't you remember her saying we'd better consult Dr. Carter about it?"

"That was to make sure we understood what she meant. Oh no, Gilk. I don't think for a moment that she saw herself as others saw her. D'you get anything else?"

"She seemed very touchy. But go on. I know you're only waiting to tell me what you got, so that you can vaunt your superior powers of observation."

"I don't think I got much more than you did," Ellis rejoined: "Two small things seemed to me very significant: though I'm not quite sure what they signify."

"They are——?"

"Both had to do with Rattray and his wife; and both were slips. One she spotted and covered up, just in time: t'other she didn't see at all. Didn't you notice?"

"How can I tell, till I hear what they are?"

"D'you remember her saying that Rattray's wife hangs on to him morning, noon, and night?"

"Yes."

"Well—then she added 'She can't always, thank God.' Why 'thank God'? That slipped out; she never noticed it. What's it mean?"

"I shouldn't think it meant anything. As you say, it just slipped out. She probably meant 'I'm glad to say she can't always hang on to him.'"

Ellis shook his head.

"I believe that when things slip out it's because there's something real behind 'em. However, time'll show."

"What was the other thing? The one you say she covered up?"

"When she asked me what on earth connection there could be between old Matt's death and what Joan felt towards Rattray's wife. She said Ursula Rattray, but just before it I'll swear she was going to say another name. Something beginning with T or D. 'About T——' or 'About D——', and then in a flash she switched it to Ursula."

"I didn't notice. But, even if she did, why need it mean anything? She just stumbled and mistook the name."

"Not she. She was going to say someone else's name."

"Whose?"

"Oh, you ass! don't you see? *His* name. The husband's. Rattray's."

"Why shouldn't she? I dare say she knows him quite well."

"Exactly, exactly! why shouldn't she! Therefore, why cover it up?"

Gilkison shook his head.

"This is all too subtle for me," he complained. "I fancy you're making mountains out of molehills."

"I'm inclined, putting those two things together—Hullo! here's Bradstreet. Well, Inspector! How goes it?"

"All right, thank you. Good morning, Mr. Gilkison. A nice day."

"Very seasonable." Ellis dug him in the ribs. "Go on, you old devil. What have you got up your sleeve?"

Bradstreet grinned.

"Nothing, Mr. McKay. Nothing at all."

"What are you doing here, then? Taking the air?"

"I thought, if it was convenient, you might like us to go along and see old Treweek."

"Capital. Nothing I'd like better. Where does he live?"

"Down to the left here."

He fell in beside them. The three gaits were so dissimilar that Gilkison gave up all attempt to keep in step.

"Any news?" Ellis asked.

"It's all been set in motion. We should hear something by twelve o'clock. How did you get on?"

"A rather tempestuous young woman. One or two nasty spots in her mind. But I think she'll play ball. By the way, I've done the dirty on you, rather."

"How's that, then?"

"D'you mind asking her what she was doing yesterday afternoon? I had rather a job to keep on confidential terms with her, and I didn't want to spoil what little good impression I might have made."

Bradstreet laughed.

"I'll see to that all right. Did you get much from her?"

"A few small points. There's more there than meets the eye, I fancy."

"I shouldn't be surprised. I don't reckon, though, she's got aught to do with this business."

"Not directly, perhaps. But—— Well. We'll see."

"Here's Treweek's place," Bradstreet said.

Gilkison turned to Ellis.

"I'll go back to the hotel," he said. "I want to collect one or two things before I start on the books."

"No, my lad. You stay here. I want you."

"But——"

"Come along in, Mr. Gilkison." Bradstreet beamed at him, and held open the little gate. "Very pleased to have you with us."

Gilkison's face folded up. It did this on so many occasions that Ellis could never be sure whether it meant he was pleased or the reverse. It pulled a shutter over all his feelings.

Mr. Treweek was not indoors. A scared-looking girl, whether niece, granddaughter, or some other kind of unwilling helper, whispered that he was out at the back.

"Well, fetch him in, my dear, will you? Tell him that Inspector Bradstreet would like a word with him."

The girl departed silently, after a pale glance at each of them in turn. It was very stuffy in the small, crowded room. Bradstreet placidly opened the window—it took a bit of forcing: both latch and hinge were stiff and rusty—tipped a sleeping cat off one chair, removed an old coat from another, and insisted on Ellis and Gilkison seating themselves. He

stood in front of the fireplace, thrusting out an enormous chest, rocking to and fro on his heels. He cocked an eye at the low smoky ceiling and whistled very softly through his teeth.

Ellis looked up at once.

"*Maritana*," he said.

"Is it? I never remember names. I was in the café in to Exeter with Mrs. Bradstreet the other day, and they were playing a thing I know as well as I know my own name; but do you think I could remember what it was called? She couldn't, either."

Ellis suddenly raised a rich but rather throaty tenor.

"When other lips and other hearts
Their tale of love shall tell——"

"That's it," Bradstreet said. "Go on."

Ellis sang on to the end of the stanza. Before he finished, the door opened slowly, and an old man stood in it, staring in sheer amazement. Seeing him, Ellis bowed and waved a hand, but did not stop.

"'Then you'll remember me,'" he carolled. "Now *you*'ll remember, Inspector. You won't ever forget the name of that again."

"Maybe you're right. Good morning, Treweek. Let me introduce these gentlemen. This is Detective-Inspector McKay from Scotland Yard, who's just been singing so nice. And this is Mr. Gilkison. We've come to ask you one or two questions about Matt Baidon."

A look of cunning at once overspread the weazened, resentful features. The visitors observed that Mr. Treweek had only one eye.

"Ah," he said. "You can't put nothin' on to me."

He blinked at them rapidly, and drew in his mouth, for all the world, Gilkison thought, as though he were pulling tight the top of a sponge bag: a comparison facilitated by his lack of teeth. A thoroughly sly, unpleasant old specimen, the book-seller decided; and an apt confidant for the unlamented Matt.

"Nobody wants to put anything on you, Treweek," Bradstreet said equably. "What makes you think that?"

"We only want your help," Ellis added.

Mr. Treweek's answer was to close his eye and tap the side of his nose.

"I knows the sort of 'elp you gents wants. You wants a chap to say 'e done what 'e never, so as you can put en away

and save yourselves the trouble of lookin' for 'oo reely done it."

"Hard words," Ellis said. "Hard words, and ill deserved. I'm surprised at you, Mr. Treweek."

"I've 'ad some," said the ancient, with satisfaction. "I knows." He looked at Bradstreet. "Well, you don't get no 'elp from me this time. I wasn't nigh the place, not in a mile and a 'alf of it, all afternoon."

"What place?" Bradstreet's face was all innocence. "What afternoon?"

"Come off it," said Mr. Treweek, in disgust. "Keep that talk for babbies. It don't go with me. You knows what I mean, so well as I do. Us all knows you and these 'ere genelmen from Lunnon are goin' round makin' wise Matt Baildon was dood away with, w'en all that 'appened was a 'unnerweight o' books falled 'pon top ees napper."

"You don't know that, Mr. Treweek," Ellis purred. "You were a mile and a half away."

Mr. Treweek's eye gleamed malevolently.

"Nor you don't catch me like that, neither. Makin' up traps for a man. 'Tisn't no cop. I got a dozen o' witnesses where I was to, all afternoon. Oversot that if you can."

"We haven't the least desire to oversot it," Ellis assured him. "There's only one thing we want to ask you, Mr. Treweek, and it's got nothing to do with what you were doing yesterday afternoon."

"Then why for d'ee want to ask it?"

"Will you put it to him, Inspector, or shall I?"

"It's quite simple, Treweek. You went in to see Mr. Baildon from time to time?"

"What if I did? That isn't no crime, is it?"

"Not at all," Ellis said. "Most meritorious."

Treweek eyed him sourly, then looked back at Bradstreet.

"Now and then, I believe, he used to ask you to post a letter for him."

"No law against that; not as I knows of."

"Can you remember if he gave you any letters during the time he was ill?"

"I don't take no account of little things like that. Why should I?"

"I just wondered if you did; that's all. When did you go to see him last?"

"Can't say. Pity I don't keep a di'ry, isn't it? I shall 'ave to, for the future, by the look o' things."

"Have you been within the last week or ten days?"

Mr. Treweek drew his mouth together again. His eye glittered. Bradstreet looked at Ellis.

"Well," he said peacefully. "If you won't tell us, we'll have to ask Mrs. Baildon."

"She don' know whether I was there or no."

"She'll know if she saw you. You might be there without her knowing, I admit. But she couldn't see you if you weren't there. Come on, man. What are you afraid of?"

"I don't trust ee." He grinned angrily. "I don't see what you'm about: 'cep' that you'm tryin' to put somethin' 'pon me what I never done."

"We only want to know whether you were there recently, and whether Mr. Baildon gave you a letter to post."

Treweek's mind went off on a fresh tack. They almost heard it click.

"It 'e did, I shouldn't call it to mind, not special. 'Tisn't nothing so remarkable, to be give a letter to post."

"He did often give you letters to post, then?"

The old man pondered cunningly before replying.

"I won't say often: but 'e did 'pon times."

"And he gave you one last week?"

"Maybe 'e did, and maybe 'e didn'."

Suddenly Ellis snapped round on him, so peremptorily as to make him start back.

"We know he did. Don't try to deny it. And we know the address on the envelope. It was to Joshua Nelder, of Cuffe Street, London."

"That it wadn't, then," Treweek squealed shrilly. "'Twas to Gilkins, or Gilkson, or some such bliddy name, see? So you bain't so clever, after all."

"Gilkison. This gentleman here, in front of you. Thank you, Mr. Treweek. That's all we wanted to know."

Ellis sat back, and regarded him benevolently.

"Why couldn't you have told us that at once? It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"'Tisn't none of my place to save you trouble," Mr. Treweek rejoined, with manifest ill humour. "That's all you thinks about. When anything goes wrong in these parts, you tries to pick on someone nigh and 'andy: 'stead o' goin' up to the camp or the aerodrome, where they'm responsible, nine times out o' ten. Afeared to go there, bain't ee? Don't want no trouble, eh? Gaah!"

Bradstreet got up.

"Well, Treweek. We'll be seeing you again, I expect. Thanks for your information. Don't trouble to see us out."

"Gaah!" said Treweek again, disgustedly.

They walked out into the road in silence.

"You took a bit of a chance with him," Bradstreet reproved Ellis.

"I know. I'm sorry. I got fed up. Anyway, he didn't post any letter to Nelder."

"No. I don't reckon he did."

"What camp and aerodrome was he talking about?"

"Dendle. And Possbury. They get the blame for everything locally—poaching and all. Well—what will you do now? Come back with me?"

Ellis looked at his watch.

"Twenty past eleven. Let's go and try our luck with Rattray."

"On second thoughts," Bradstreet said, "I think I'll come and start you off with him. He knows me. He might think it odd if I left it all to you, and kept out of sight. Might think we had something on him. I'll just introduce you, and then clear off."

"Good man. That'll be fine. I—yes—wait a minute. It might be. By God, it might."

Ellis stood for a few seconds pointing, like a corpulent dog. Bradstreet exchanged glances with Gilkison.

"Got it!" Ellis exclaimed. "I knew there was something I was trying to remember, and it had slipped to the back of my mind. Gilk—yesterday evening—when we were talking to those two women: did you spot how it rattled them when I asked if old Baildon had written to a bookseller?"

"Now you mention it, I did."

"Well. Does that say anything to you?"

"I can't say it does."

"Not coupled with the interview we've just had?"

"No."

"Well." Ellis grinned at Bradstreet. "Think it over."

CHAPTER TEN

THE FIRST person they saw, on emerging from the high yew hedges that flanked the winding narrow path, was Rattray's invalid wife. Her chair stood in the shade of a little verandah in front of the house.

A small dog came from under the chair and barked vigorously, wagging his tail. His mistress looked up with a start. Her face contracted at once in peevish dismay : she picked up a tiny hand-bell and rang it vehemently.

"Coming," sang a tuneful baritone from somewhere unseen : and after a very short interval Rattray appeared. He was in shirt sleeves, smoking a pipe, and they noticed that he did not hurry. Evidently such a summons was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Yes, dear?"

She made a helpless gesture, but he had seen the visitors. He stared, then took out his pipe and advanced to meet them. Coming closer, he recognised Bradstreet.

"Hallo, Bradstreet. I didn't spot you. Can't see a thing these days, without my glasses."

He looked enquiringly at Ellis and Gilkison. Bradstreet introduced them, omitting to mention Ellis's position, and styling him plain Mr.

"How d'you do. How d'you do."

Rattray gave each a firm handshake, looking him straight in the eye. His smile was cordial, but with something of the professional glad-to-meet-you of a lay preacher or a social worker.

"Let me introduce you to my wife. Ursula, dear : Inspector Bradstreet has brought two gentleman from London to see us."

She screwed herself into an attitude of pathetic appeal, and smiled weakly, disclosing long yellow teeth. The bones of her face were good, and her eyes had long lashes, but any looks she might have possessed were ruined by the deep lines in her forehead, the slack invalid's mouth, the dead skin, and the general expression of resentful self-pity.

Her presence cast a restraint on the conversation. While Bradstreet was hesitating how best to raise the subject of their visit, Rattray himself plunged into it.

"A terrible business, this, about Mr. Baidon. Quite sudden, I'm told."

Bradstreet looked up in surprise, to be met with a pursing

up of the lips and a slight but definite gesture in the direction of Mrs. Rattray.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. Er—there are just one or two points on which we would like to consult you. Mr. McKay is here with Mr. Gilkison about the books."

"Oh yes."

He looked blank for a minute, then caught Bradstreet's wink.

"That is," Bradstreet said, "if Mrs. Rattray will excuse us."

Her face contracted with disappointment. She tried to smile.

"Of course," Rattray said. "We can go down to the end of the garden. You'll be all right, won't you, my dear? I'll be in sight, if you want anything. Then we shan't bore you, talking business."

She gave her sickly smile again, and followed them with murderous eyes as Rattray led the way.

"David," she called thinly, after he had gone a few yards.

He stopped.

"Yes, dear?"

"Hadn't you better put on your coat, if you're going to sit still? You don't want to catch a chill."

"I'll be all right."

She uttered a forlorn little cry, and he turned again.

"I'm quite warm, truly. Look—I'll get it, and have it by me. Then I can put it on if I want it. Excuse me," he said to the others, and ran off, with stiff self-conscious strides, leaping a flower bed. She watched him go, turned to the three men with her pretence of a smile, then stared at the corner of the house till he came back, a brown sports coat over his arm.

He waved it at her. She called a pet name softly: they could only tell what it was from her expression.

"Now, gentlemen."

He came up with them, energetic and manly, and conducted them to a white painted seat at the garden's end. It was semi-circular, comfortably low, and backed by several clumps of lavender, on which the butterflies were ceaselessly busy.

"Nice garden you've got here, Mr. Rattray," Ellis said.

"I could make it much better, if I had more time. A schoolmaster's days are pretty full. And, what with other activities—well, I can't give it all the attention I should like."

"You do a lot in the village, I understand."

"I do what I can," Rattray answered shortly, looking straight in front of him at the grass border. "What with the Scouts, and the Institute, and a weekly lecture at the camp, I'm kept pretty busy. Those are in my spare time, of course." He cleared his throat. "In times like these, I feel that each of us must contribute all he can to the common cause. If we do nothing for our fellow creatures, how can we expect them to do anything for us—to put it no higher than that? We can't take more out of life than we put into it."

Having uttered these sentiments, he looked briefly and earnestly in the face of each in turn, as if to see whether they agreed with him.

Ellis uttered a purr of approval, causing Gilkison to glance at him in wry apprehension. It was usually the prelude to sarcasm or hilarity: a device to encourage the victim to further excess, until he should have exposed himself beyond hope of recovery. In spite of their long friendship, Gilkison could never bring himself to trust in Ellis's restraint or common sense. However often he assured himself that too much hung on a moment or an interview, he always trembled lest Ellis ruin everything by some irresponsible outburst of levity. He could never accustom himself to the practice of a mind so unlike his own.

"Indeed," Ellis concurred. "Indeed." He sighed. "I wish more people felt as you do, Mr. Rattray. It would make all our problems easier. The Inspector and I might have nothing to do, it's true; but what would that be, compared to the interests of the community?"

Careful, oh, careful, you ass, groaned Gilkison inwardly, looking in terror to see Rattray draw himself up, offended. But the schoolmaster replied in perfect seriousness.

"I see you are an idealist, Mr. McKay. Rather an optimist, too, if you will allow me to say so. I fear that wrongdoing will not be so easily rooted out. No."

He shook his head, then looked up sharply at Bradstreet.

"Am I to gather that Mr. McKay is also connected with the police?"

"Yes." Bradstreet completed the introduction. "I did not give the full particulars just now, for fear of alarming Mrs. Rattray."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness," Rattray. "Thank you. That was indeed kind."

He gazed at Bradstreet, then turned to the others.

"And what can I do for you, gentlemen?"

Bradstreet got up.

"Detective Inspector McKay would like to ask you a few questions," he said. "If you don't mind, now that I have introduced you, I'll go back to the station. I've a good deal on my hands."

All three watched him as he went towards the verandah. He stopped for a few moments by Mrs. Rattray's chair, and they heard the kindly rumble of his voice, sympathetic, reassuring. She turned her face up to him, shielding her eyes against the light, and her tones followed his across the grass, unsteady, overcharged, squeaky with pleasure.

Rattray breathed out strongly through his nose.

"A fine chap, Bradstreet," he said. "It's a privilege to know him."

"I only made his acquaintance yesterday," Ellis said, "and I feel already as if we'd been friends for years."

"I wouldn't say he was altogether an easy man to know. A great deal is obvious at the first meeting, but there are depths beyond."

"I'm sure there are." Ellis looked at him respectfully. "I see you're a student of character, Mr. Rattray. That's splendid. Because," he went on, in answer to Rattray's stare of surprise, "it's on questions of character that I wish to consult you."

He repeated, almost word for word, what he had said to Eunice Caunter about his desire for a general picture of the situation at the Baidons', and their relationship towards the chief figures in their circle.

To his surprise, however, Rattray did not bite. He nodded two or three times while Ellis was speaking, and continued to look at him fixedly for some seconds when he had finished.

"Quite," he said. "Yes. I can see the value to you of a general survey of the position. But, surely, you are looking for something with a particular bearing on what has happened? It appears to me, for instance, that an analysis of Mrs. and Miss Baidon's attitude towards Mr. Baidon can interest you only if you have reason to suspect one or other of them. I trust that is not the case?"

"Inspector Bradstreet and I suspect no one, Mr. Rattray. We cannot yet even be positive that there is anything to suspect. But to suspect no one is to suspect everyone. That is to say, if Mr. Baidon's death was not an accident, the only people we can competently declare to have had nothing to do with it are Inspector Bradstreet and our two selves. At least—I think we may also exclude Mrs. Rattray."

He smiled, but got no answering smile. Rattray evidently thought the pleasantry in bad taste.

"It's all very well for you, Mr. Rattray. You live here, and know the people intimately. I don't. You can decide at once, on your knowledge, that A and B and C may be eliminated. I can't. What's more, I'm not allowed to. For me, nothing is allowed to count but sheer, hard, police court evidence. But look what a lot of time I can be saved, if someone who knows will give me a hint or two and stop me from looking in the wrong direction."

"But, Mr. McKay, you have just made it plain to me that you are not allowed to rely upon hearsay evidence."

Ellis rubbed his hands, and gazed at him admiringly.

"I see I have come to the right man," he said. "Look, Mr. Rattray. I'll put it this way. Let us imagine that you have just been appointed to the headmastership of a new school."

He stopped, for Rattray had started violently. However, he said nothing, so Ellis continued:

"A week after you arrive there to take up your duties, there are several cases of theft. Now: you can't convict your thief except on material evidence. But do you mean to tell me you aren't going to consult the teachers who have been there all the time, and shape your conduct with some reference to what they tell you about the various pupils?"

"In any case, Mr. Rattray," he sat up abruptly and changed his tone, "if you can't trust me not to waste your time, you can trust me not to waste mine. I have my own reasons for coming to you and asking you certain questions. Naturally, you're under no obligation to answer them. If you'd prefer not to——"

He got up. Rattray at once put out a restraining hand.

"Not at all, not at all. You misunderstand me. I was merely curious to know just in what way——"

"Perhaps you would sooner talk to Inspector Bradstreet?"

"No, no. Please sit down, Mr. McKay. I am more than ready to answer any question you may care to ask."

Ellis sat down, still looking ruffled. He put his hands on his knees, and cleared his throat.

"Inspector Bradstreet has given me a clear picture of the Baildon ménage. Yesterday afternoon, Mr. Baildon was in his room for two and a half hours. It appears from their statements that Mrs. Baildon spent this time with a friend, Miss Jenkinson, and with her sister: and that Miss Joan Baildon sat at the bottom of the garden, reading and sewing,

except for ten minutes when she went to get some biscuits for her father which she had forgotten to put on her mother's shopping list. Mrs. Baildon's statement is susceptible of proof: the girl's isn't. The ten minutes away can be checked all right, and at one time during the afternoon she was seen by, and exchanged words with, Mr. Pawle, who left the newspaper. When I tell you that the list of possible suspects—*possible* suspects, mind you—includes Dr. Carter, an American gentleman who came earlier in the afternoon to see some books, any tradesmen who may have called, anyone in fact who could have got in unobserved during those two and a half hours and got out again, you will see that character and motive are of the first importance in this case, and you will, I hope, lose any doubts you may have upon the validity of my enquiries."

"My dear Mr. McKay—please—let me assure you, I entertained no doubts which you yourself did not raise. I was fully prepared to answer each and every question."

One for you, Ellis, Gilkison thought to himself. You were too clever for once.

Ellis proceeded to put a number of obvious questions about the principal personages, concentrating on Dr. Carter, Mrs. Exworthy, and Treweek. He carefully kept away from the Baidons, and, to Gilkison's surprise, made no mention whatever of Eunice Caunter.

Then, without warning, he jumped straight into the Baildon household.

"You have been giving Joan Baildon Latin lessons, I understand?"

Ratray's right foot, which had been tapping rhythmically, stopped.

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"For——" he considered, head tilted back. "For close on ten months."

"Do you find her an apt pupil?"

"An extremely conscientious and willing one." He flushed. "If she had had normal opportunities, she would have experienced no difficulty whatever. But, as I expect you know, her eyesight has been a grave handicap. And—to tell you the truth—I don't think the teaching she had previously was of first rate quality."

"Let me see. She has also been having lessons from a Miss Caunter, has she not?"

"Miss Caunter does not teach Latin," Ratray said quickly:

" Her subjects are English, French, History and Needle-work."

" I see. None of Joan Baidon's shortcomings are to be laid at her door, then. As a matter of fact, Miss Caunter has been of very considerable help to the girl, hasn't she? Dr. Carter gave me to understand that she had done a great deal for her."

" She has given freely of her time. No genuine teacher could fail to do so, in such a case."

" Good. It's highly important for me to know this, when I come to interview Joan Baidon. She is in a highly nervous state, and—well, you can see how carefully I must go with her."

Ratray inclined his head. He moistened his lower lip with his tongue.

" Mr. Ratray, I'm going to ask you a very direct question."

Watching him closely, Ellis fancied he saw him brace himself.

" Joan Baidon strikes me—I admit the circumstances in which I met her were unfavourable, and she was naturally agitated—all the same, she strikes me as a girl suffering from severe inner conflict. Probably from more than one conflict. Now, Mr. Ratray, judging from your knowledge of her, what would you say these conflicts are? "

Ratray considered before replying. His foot resumed its tapping.

" There is always, of course, the conflict with her immediate environment. She and her mother on one side, and her father on the other. Then there's her longing to get out of the house and out of the village into a wider world. I suppose those are the chief two conflicts in her life."

" I had wondered if there was anything else. It struck me that she was a girl who had been emotionally over-stimulated."

The foot stopped.

" In what way? " Ratray asked, after a pause.

" I hoped that you could tell me. She has the look of a child who has borne burdens far beyond her years."

" That is true of most young people, in my experience," Ratray said, more confidently. " We tend to forget the intensity of young people's difficulties. They can suffer terribly. And, nowadays—"

" I know that," Ellis interrupted him. " But usually what they feel intensely are their own problems, their own sufferings, the sufferings proper to youth. Miss Baidon has the look of someone who has been forced to feel prematurely the pains and difficulties of older people."

" I was about to say, that can happen too, nowadays."

"If it is true in her case, you don't know what the special problems are?"

"No. I don't think I do. She—— No." He shook his head. "I can't say."

"When you are with her, is the conversation confined to the lessons, or does it cover wider grounds?"

"We talk, sometimes, of the events of the day. And of her future hopes and prospects. I have once or twice confided in her my anxieties about my wife. It is flattering to young people to be consulted in such matters."

"Were you trying to flatter her?"

The question was rapped out so sharply that Rattray blinked.

"No, no. You misunderstand me. I genuinely wanted to know how the matter might look to another woman. Joan is young, I know, but she has an air of maturity which now and then makes one forget how young she is. My dear wife suffers a great deal, and needs humouring: and it is always a problem to know how far one should go. One does not want to enervate her character, to give in more than one should: and yet one's instinct is to yield in everything."

"Quite. You mean, then, that you consulted Joan for your own sake, and at the same time reflected that it would please her to be consulted."

"Exactly, Mr. McKay. That is exactly what I mean." He looked down at the grass, then up again. "Possibly I have been to blame, in laying upon her some of these older problems we have been talking about. I hope not."

Ellis's next question was completely unexpected to both listeners.

"Mr. Rattray. Did you go into the Baidons' house at any time yesterday afternoon?"

There was a moment of complete silence. Then Rattray swallowed.

"Yes," he said. "I did."

Ellis leaned forward. His voice seemed to express no more than a friendly interest.

"What took you there, Mr. Rattray?"

Rattray's face had flooded with colour. He jerked up his head and answered firmly.

"I had borrowed a book of Mr. Baidon's, in order to verify some facts I needed for a talk I was going to give my scouts."

"Oh." Ellis's eyes opened wide. "Maft would lend, would he?"

"Some books—to some people—but always for a stipulated time. If you said you wanted a book for a day, or two days, or a week, then you had to bring it back punctually at the end of that time, or there was trouble. I had promised to bring the book back yesterday, and, as I was going to pass the house, I took the opportunity to leave it in on my way."

"Why," asked Ellis softly, "did you not leave it there in the morning, when you were passing the house with Mrs. Rattray?"

Rattray's flush, which had been fading, deepened.

"You forgot it, perhaps?" Ellis prompted him. "You hadn't it with you?"

"No," Rattray said. "I had not forgotten, and I had the book with me. I—— It sounds foolish, I know; almost incredible, perhaps. But Mrs. Rattray has not been very well these last few days, and, when she is like that, she gets foolish fancies. She doesn't like me to take her into the Baidons' place."

"Why?"

Rattray raised his brows.

"I can't tell you, I'm sure. Once she heard Mr. Baildon screaming in one of his rages, and that was very painful to her. Her hearing is abnormally sensitive. It may have been that. More probably, there was no rational basis. So often, there is none. At any rate, she wouldn't let me wheel her in; and, when I went to put her chair by the gate, and go in alone, she became frightened and said that I must not leave her. So I had no choice but to obey, and bring the book up again in the afternoon."

"She doesn't mind being left at home?"

"There is always someone with her. I never leave her otherwise. Either it is the girl from next door, or the woman who does the house, or another neighbour. Mrs. Rattray is never alone in the house."

Ellis regarded him with speculative eye.

"Did you give the book back to Mr. Baildon?"

Rattray stumbled in his speech and swallowed, shaking his head in his haste to deny this.

"I left it on the table just inside the door. I did not see Mr. Baildon at all."

"I can understand that one wouldn't exactly seek an interview with him. What book was it, by the way?"

"*The Cruise of the Cachalot*, by Bullen."

"Good book. First edition?"

"Yes. In mint condition."

" Anyone see you on your way in or out ? "

" No one. Wait—yes. There was, I think, someone in the road when I came out."

" Anyone you knew ? "

" No."

" You didn't see Mrs. Baildon ? Or Joan ? "

" No. I just went straight in and out again."

" When would this have been ? "

" I can't say, within a few minutes. I think I left home soon after three. Yes. That would be it. The girl came in about three."

" Right, Mr. Rattray." Ellis got up. " That's all for now. We shall be in again soon, I expect."

" Any help I can give, at any time," Rattray assured him earnestly. " I'll be only too glad. I feel convinced, you know, that you will find the whole thing was an accident."

" It would be much simpler for all of us, wouldn't it ? " They walked up together towards the house. " What splendid lupins. Do you do anything special for them, or is it just the soil ? "

" I tend them carefully ; but I haven't given them any special fertiliser, if that is what you mean."

" Wonderful. Wonderful. You must have a green thumb. Well—here we are, Mrs. Rattray ! Thank you for lending your husband to us all this time. We won't keep him from you any longer. You must so seldom get him all to yourself for a whole day."

" Yes, indeed." She responded at once to the warmth of his voice, with a *mouse* of self pity. " He's out so much. And in the evenings, too."

" In the evenings. Well, well : that is hard, Mrs. Rattray. But then, you know, he's such an important man here. So much depends on him."

" Yes." Her voice was a faint wail. " Three nights a week. Till ten o'clock."

" Ah well. One of the penalties of marrying such a useful and popular man. At all events, Mrs. Rattray, we won't steal any more of your time. Good-bye."

" Good-bye," she said. Gilkison, taking his leave, saw the momentary animation fade from her face.

The schoolmaster walked them to the gate.

" Well," Ellis assured him, " we'll be meeting again. Any chance of seeing you at the Plume of Feathers ? Or do you give pubs a miss ? "

" Not at all. I take a glass of cider every now and then."

I'm not at all narrow-minded. I find, too, one can have far more influence with the men if one does not hold aloof from their pleasures and pastimes. And exercise, too, perhaps, a restraining influence at times."

"Good. Well, if you've nothing better to do any time, look us up. We'll be there most evenings."

"My evenings are rather mortgaged." Rattray smiled wanly, and inclined his head towards the house. "But we will meet soon, I hope. Good day. Good day, Mr. Gilkison."

He gave each of them the same vigorous handshake, then turned and strode manfully back to his wife.

"Well"—Ellis let out a long breath—"what do you make of *that*?"

"Wouldn't it perhaps save time if you gave your opinion? I notice you only use mine in order to correct it."

"Inaccurate, Gilk. Not so at all. But never mind."

A stone lay in the road. Ellis kicked it neatly into the ditch.

"That man," he pronounced, "is in a hell of a funk about *something*. Talking to him was like a doctor sounding a sore abdomen. The whole thing's tense and alert: the fingers go about, prodding, until the patient winces. 'Sore just there, eh?' Prod about some more. 'There too, eh?' And again. And all the time the patient keeps saying with a hollow ring in his voice that he's sure there's nothing wrong really, and it's only a trifle, isn't it, doctor, and he'll be all right the next day."

"Very apt," Gilkison commented drily. "Only I didn't notice very much collaboration on the patient's part."

"You know, Gilk, as I've often said, you're nothing like the fool you let on to be. Oh, all right, all right. The general impression which you give is misleading. There—is that better? And now, if you've done sparring, we'll get back to business. Shut up. I know you didn't. Good God, man, I don't have to wait for you to put your thoughts into words."

"I admit it is much more convenient for you to invent them. Then you have some chance of providing an answer."

"Rattray," Ellis said, "has something on his conscience. That's the general bellyache. Did you observe the sensitive spots? Did you see how he shied off and his foot stopped tapping when we got on to Joan? And t'other wench? No likee proddee. Now—just what's up, I wonder?"

Knowing no answer was required, Gilkison said nothing.

"Nothing specific, perhaps. A man who is obviously vigorous and healthy and a prig and a bit of a flesh-mortifier,

and married to that poor wretched scrap of human wreckage—he might well be in a state of tension, and tighten up at the mention of any girl, particularly a girl he knew. There's always the risk of reading too much into a symptom. We're too apt to find the sort of thing we're looking for. I've seen chaps in a situation like Rattray's madly jumpy over nothing but the general strain of it. All the same, I think there's more to this bloke. I have the feeling there *is* something specific here. He's worried about a definite thing, wouldn't you say? "

"I should have thought so, certainly."

"You get that artificial, pumped-up manner with lots of 'em when they're not sure of themselves. Plummy voice, false emphasis, heartiness, and so on. He's married above him, socially, and in a village I dare say that still matters."

"Or he thinks it does."

"Same thing, for him. My guess is that there's a girl somewhere."

"Here? Difficult to keep it secret, surely? "

"Impossible. Perhaps that's what's worrying him. Afraid that, with all this poking about, awkward enquiries will be made. For instance, where was he going yesterday afternoon, besides leaving a book on old Baildon? My dear Gilk, I assure you, the people who throw the temperaments and go all hot under the collar are almost always the innocent, not the guilty."

"You talk as if I said it was he that killed Matt."

"He might have," Ellis conceded. "But I don't think he did."

"The famous intuition? "

"No hunch at all. I just don't see why he should."

"He felt very strongly about the old man's treatment of Joan. That was genuine enough."

"Yes. But why do it yesterday? "

"Perhaps he was never alone with him before."

"What interests me far more is, why didn't he go down the garden and have a word with Joan? He must have known she'd be at home."

"She might have gone out with her mother."

"A girl like that, working her eyes out of her head to get to Oxford, and given a real chance like a whole holiday? She'd be somewhere with a book. And it wasn't far to go."

"How do you know he didn't? You've only his word for it."

"True. But he wouldn't lie about that. Joan might let it

out. And someone might have seen him. Remember, she could be seen from the road."

They went on speculating and arguing until they reached the police station. Here they were received by an amiable and red-faced sergeant, who ushered them in to Bradstreet.

"Don't grin at me like that, you old So-and-So," Ellis said to him, as soon as the door was shut. "Out with it."

"Was I grinning?" Bradstreet asked, with mild surprise. "I didn't know. Well—we've got the result of the autopsy. The cause of death was suffocation."

"That helps us a hell of a lot."

"Threads from the muffler were found in the mouth and throat."

"He might have fallen with it across his mouth. Bruises?"

"Several from the books."

"Before or after death?"

"Can't say. As near as makes no matter."

"H'm. So we're no further than we were."

"There is a slight bruising of the lower lip. Against the dental plate. But that, again——"

"Yes. Well, I didn't expect anything. Surgeon no views?"

"Cautious. Doesn't like the smell of it, but won't say anything definite."

"How was Carter?"

"Stiff. Resentful. Bit sarcastic."

"At my expense."

"He didn't name anyone in particular."

"Bless his heart. What else have you got?"

"Your American friend is at Exeter. Staying at the Rougemont. Went off this morning for the day, but said he would be back to dinner."

"Good. Nelder?"

"Nothing yet. You know," Bradstreet rubbed his chin, "we've got to go careful there. We can't pull him in, just like that. There's nothing to connect him with the business in hand. At least, nothing that I can see."

"Say you want to talk to him about something else. Gilk—you can help us there. What might we want to talk to him about?"

Gilkison cleared his throat. The sound gave a prim, pedantic colour to his utterance.

"A number of things. Price agreements. The presence in his shop of copies of new books that aren't review copies and have not been ordered from the publishers. His own publishing business."

" I didn't know he had one," Ellis said.

" It isn't run under his own name, of course."

" What might be wrong with it, Mr. Gilkison? " Bradstreet asked.

" It's the old game. An amateur writes a book. A retired colonel, a cook, a governess, an only daughter, a crank—anyone you like. They see the advertisement of Nelder's company, and send their manuscripts in. Nelder writes an ecstatic letter, saying it is marvellous, but that, as the author is unknown, he or she must contribute to the cost of publishing. The contribution is duly sent. Nelder has the book printed as cheaply as he can, binds a few copies only—enough to meet the author's needs and those of the few friends who'll ask for copies. The book drops dead, and Nelder pockets the balance. It's a wicked ramp."

Bradstreet nodded.

" We get complaints about that sort of thing, but, unfortunately, it's inside the law."

" It is, if the publisher does what he undertook to do. If he prints and binds the number of copies specified in the contract. Very often he doesn't. He takes the risk."

" I've had cases," Bradstreet said, " where there was no written contract at all."

" Then, of course, you can do nothing. But, with Nelder—can't you just say you've had complaints, and want to question him? "

" You see? " Ellis grinned. " Absolutely immoral. No scruples at all. And then he'll turn on us and say the police are unscrupulous."

" Anyway, I can give you three or four lines that'll make Nelder think you have a right to question him. Things I know for certain."

" But can't prove? "

" It isn't any business of mine to prove them."

" We could go and see him, anyway," Ellis said.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AFTER LUNCH, Ellis announced his intention of going to call upon Mrs. Baildon's sister. Mr. Pawle, the vicar, and Mrs. Exworthy he had handed over to Bradstreet, alleging his own generosity. Bradstreet smiled placidly, and was not deceived.

Once more Gilkison petitioned to be allowed to get to work upon the books. He expressed himself with such heat that Ellis was obliged to soothe him and tell him that he should start that same afternoon, as soon as this last visit was over.

"You look so respectable, Gilk. You inspire such confidence. You've no idea what a help you are to me."

Gilkison refused to rise. He complained again when they set out only twenty minutes after lunch, and received a homily upon laziness. By the time they reached their goal, his manner was one of dignified reserve.

Ellis chuckled to himself. He enjoyed baiting the precise and old-maidish side of Gilkison; it was one of the many pleasures that were built into the strong affection between them. Even better, he loved to exasperate Gilkison into attacking him. The venom and direction of the darts that then came in showers delighted him and ministered to his vanity. And, all the time, he knew that Gilkison's pique was superficial only, and that he, too, recognised and enjoyed the game.

"He's like an aunt I had," Ellis once said of him. "We used to rag her like demons, and she adored it. When we got tired, she'd start to trail her coat and attract our attention till we began again."

Thoughts of an aunt seemed appropriate as they walked up Martha Attwill's path: but Joan Baildon's aunt proved to be not at all like Ellis's.

They did not see her at first. The two-storey cottage of brown stone had in front of it a little porch and conservatory combined. Both the glass door and the inner door stood wide. A stiff bell, of the kind that one turns like a key, set up a jangling just inside the door, so loud as to startle them.

"Yes?"

Ellis spun round. He could not tell where the voice came from.

"Hallo, then?"

They looked back into the small garden, to their left, and

saw a plump little woman sitting in the shade of an arbour. In front of her gleamed a white enamel basin.

"Oh, there you are."

Ellis plunged across to her, Gilkison rather nervously following.

"Excuse me if I don't get up."

Martha Attwill was small, dark, plump, and smiling. She bore a likeness to her sister which one saw immediately, and immediately dismissed; for no two expressions could have been more unlike. This woman—she might have been fifty-five or sixty—radiated a steady and cheerful confidence. She had come to terms with life, found it neither good nor bad, and cared for nobody.

She was shelling peas: the basin was on her lap. Ellis introduced Gilkison and himself.

"Sit down," she said. "I was wondering how long it'd be before you came. There's room for one here, but the end's rickety. I wouldn't risk it. Try the stool."

"We can't sit idle. Let me get another basin. Two, in fact. Even Gilk can shell peas."

"Don't mind him," she said to Gilkison.

Ellis stood over her.

"Where are the basins? Tell me, and I'll find 'em."

"There's only one as I'll trust you with. But you can get a basket if you like. That is, if you want to. There's no compulsion."

"I'll have the basin, and Gilk shall have the basket. He can't bear to be left out of things. It makes him sulky."

"Basket's hanging up behind the door in the kitchen. Basin's under the sink in the scullery."

"I'll get 'em."

"He'll bring something else," said Miss Attwill placidly to Gilkison. "Men always do. I let a chap lay the table for supper last week, and he put things on it I hadn't seen for years. Forgotten I had them in the house. I don't know how he found them. 'Tis a mystery to me."

Gilkison made an embarrassed sound. He was saved from thinking of a reply by a burst of tenor carolling from within.

"*Esultate! Esultate!*" cried the voice; and after a few moments Ellis emerged, brandishing a basket and a basin.

"Here we are, auntie. Got 'em in one."

"Cheeky toad," Miss Attwill said contentedly. Ellis drew the stool close to her feet, sat on it, considered the basin, frowned, set it on the ground between his feet, reached forward and grabbed a mass of the bright green pods, and set

to work. Self consciously, Gilkison rose, possessed himself of the basket, and began.

For a time there was no sound but the methodical slitting of the pods, and the tinkle of the peas on the metal of Ellis's basin. Pigeons were cooing intermittently somewhere behind the house. To Gilkison the whole scene seemed unreal. Ellis was working away as if he had known the garden and the little woman all his life.

"Queer business, this, auntie," Ellis said suddenly.

"H'm."

He reached forward for more pods.

"Think it was an accident?"

She selected a large pod, and looked at it.

"It ought to be."

"For all our sakes. But d'you think it was?"

There was a short pause, while she cleared the pod, and dropped it.

"No," she said, without emphasis.

"That's what I feel. At the same time, I can't see who. And, even if I could see who, I can't see why—at that time."

"If anyone was minded to kill Matt, they'd have done it long ago. At least, I would have, if it had been me."

Ellis nodded. "There are a good many questions I can't very well ask you."

"You can ask 'em all right. I don't say I shall answer."

"The strongest argument in favour of those two is what you've just said. If they wanted to bump him off, why wait till now? Especially when they've had such excellent opportunities before."

A pea fell outside the basin. He retrieved it surreptitiously, brushed it on his sleeve, and dropped it in with the rest. Miss Attwill's eyes twinkled, but she said nothing.

"I want to see that girl clear of all this, and launched at Oxford," Ellis went on. "That's one reason why I've come to you."

"'Twill be a good day for her when she gets away from West Nattering."

"I don't think they're in any real danger, those two, whatever happens." He spoke as if he were thinking aloud. "The coroner's jury will see to that. Still, we want something stronger. We don't want the girl followed by whispers in years to come."

"People do talk," Miss Attwill agreed.

"And she'd be just the one to magnify it, and let it prey on her."

"She does take things hard. But there, you can't blame her."

"It strikes me, auntie, there's been far too much on those young shoulders."

"Ah!" For the first time, Miss Attwill's casual tone hardened. "I've spoken my mind about it, more than once."

"It's a mercy she's had you to turn to. To confide in."

"She don't say much. I don't encourage her to. I just set her to help me with some job, and be a child again. If she hasn't got her nose in some old book. I don't hold with so much bookwork, for a young girl."

"Nor do I. But it's her one way of escape, poor child."

"The only reason I put up with it. Even so, I've often made her shut the books. 'That's enough, child,' I've said to her. And she was often glad to obey me."

"Work. Home. Eyes. Enough in all conscience. But there's more. What else is there, auntie?"

"Ah," she said, and made no move to answer him. He stopped shelling the peas, and looked at her.

"Help bought at a price," he conjectured.

Miss Attwill's mouth tightened.

"You're not going to get any gossip out of me," she said, "nor no scandal-mongering neither."

"You don't approve, though," Ellis said, watching her through half-closed eyes, and rocking two and fro on the stool.

"What I think's none of your business. Get on with your work, man, and leave me do mine."

Ellis attacked the peas again.

"That's all right, auntie," he said cheerfully. "We understand one another, you and I."

"Cheeky toad." She was mollified.

For a while they were silent. The noise of the pigeons and the rhythmical slitting of the pods were beginning to hypnotise Gilkison. He still could not believe in the scene at all. The other two had an understanding out of his reach. He could see it, but could not see how they had arrived at it.

"Yes," Ellis said, looking around him. "A good place for the child to come. Shouldn't be surprised if this is what's kept her sane."

"'Tis restful, here in the garden."

"And in the parlour. Summer and winter. I could just see it, of a winter evening, with the fire twinkling on the warming pans and on that Spanish mahogany sideboard."

"Who told you you might go in there?"

"Only a peep, auntie. Only a peep. I couldn't resist it."

"Snooping round."

"My trade, auntie. My horrid trade."

"And your pleasure. Don't tell me."

"I'm interested in my fellow creatures. Not only to their harm. That's only an accident. A melancholy accident of my trade. Even then, I'm interested in the innocent more than in the guilty. Someone's suffered. Someone's been the victim. Someone's blood cries aloud. I think of them, auntie."

"Yes. There's that side to it. But you'd be a snooper, even if you weren't paid for it."

"I said, I'm interested in my fellow creatures."

"Oh, you're a great hero, I'm sure. There. That's the lot."

"Let me carry 'em in for you, auntie."

"Do what you like. Have you got all you came for?"

She eyed him ironically. He grinned, unabashed.

"Not quite. I was going to ask you if you'd be a darling and invite those two poor creatures down here for a bit to-day. It'll be so good for them to get away from the house."

"And give you a chance to poke around. Nosey Parker."

"I hadn't only that in mind. I was genuinely thinking of them."

"Drat the man," said Miss Attwill. "He talks as if no one had any thought but him. If you want to know, I've asked 'em down here for the whole evening. The peas are for them. Did you reckon I was going to eat 'em all myself? I've asked 'em for tea and supper. That's why you'll have to go. I must start making ready. I haven't enough for you two as well."

"Auntie." Ellis embraced her. "You're an angel. You think of everything."

"Get out with you," Miss Attwill exclaimed. "I suppose you think nobody can do the right thing without you come and tell 'em."

"When I want putting right, auntie, I'll come to you."

She turned to Gilkison.

"What do you think of it all?" she asked. "You haven't said aught yet."

"He doesn't get the chance," said Ellis. "You and I do all the talking."

"Cheeky toad. I pity you," she said to Gilkison, "if you have to be with him all day."

"Heaven forbid," Gilkison said. "We only meet occasionally."

"You don't work with him, then?"

Ellis cut in and explained his friend's job and errand. She nodded, and became grave.

"See to them," she said. "Annie's so bitter against the books, she might do something silly just to get rid of them."

"Gilk will look after her. He's a romantic soul. The care of the widow and the fatherless is just his line. Besides, he knows about books. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but he does."

She gave Ellis a slap.

"You leave him alone. He's got better manners than you."

"That's what my wife always says."

"For the good Lord's sake! Are you married?"

"Triumphantly."

"Where's your wife?"

"She doesn't accompany me on my professional trips."

"You said this was a holiday."

"Not to you. The subject was never mentioned. Aha! No time for gossip. Got you there, auntie."

"Don't take your wife on holidays, eh? Well—I guess she's just as glad. Any woman'd want a holiday from your tongue."

"She is on holiday, as it happens. Or I wouldn't be here. Gilk knew I was at a loose end, so he asked me to come with him."

"Well. Do something useful, now you are here."

She came with them to the gate.

"Auntie. Why did your sister marry Matt?"

She looked past him at the trees, heavy in the splendour of their new foliage.

"Don't ask me. Why does a woman ever marry a man?"

"Dozens of reasons, auntie. Literally, dozens. Why did Kathleen ever marry me? Not for my golden locks. Not for my blue eyes. If you can believe her, it was because she couldn't bear to see all my things in such a mess, and because she liked the silly way my hair sticks up at the back. Like a duck's bottom. Her words, not mine."

He cocked his head on one side.

"I don't expect your sister married Matt because he looked like any part of a duck."

Miss Attwill bent down, and tweaked up a tiny weed from the flower bed.

"Annie was always a fool, to my way of thinking. She slaved for father——"

"She's younger than you."

"Meaning, why didn't I? I wouldn't stand it. I cleared out, and made a home for myself."

"Leaving her to do the job."

"She could have cleared out, same as I did."

"Not she."

"She could, if she'd had the guts."

"But she hadn't."

"If she liked to stay, it was her lookout. Then father died, and what does she go and do but marry a man that was worse."

"She needed it, by then. Tyranny. Someone to boss her."

"You can't make out I'm responsible for it," Miss Attwill said, looking at him with amusement, "so you needn't try."

"You've given me a good point in her favour, anyway, auntie. She's all the less likely to have bumped Matt off. That's what I really wanted. Thank you."

"Liar," said Miss Attwill cheerfully. "Get out with you."

CHAPTER TWELVE

ELLIS and Gilkison were once again in Matt Baidon's front room. The afternoon sun poured in the window, and motes swam gravely in the rich shaft. Gilkison, wholly preoccupied, picked up one book after another, opened and inspected it, and made an entry in a notebook. Ellis read desultorily, and hummed to himself, stopping now and then when his interest was really caught.

While they were so engaged, a knock sounded on the door: a knock at once expressive of good-humour and confidence.

Ellis looked up, then, dramatising himself, leaned to one side and made in a semi-circular sweep for the door, giving the long bookshelf a violent shove as he passed.

"'I co-ome, I come,'" he chanted, and stumped to the front door, "'I co-ome, I come, my hea-rt's delight; I COME, I COME, my——'"

He jerked the door open with shattering suddenness, to disclose a middle-aged gentleman, equipped with co-responder shoes, pale flannels graced by a thin dark stripe, a linen coat, and a panama—with which, at the moment, he was fanning his face. Ellis took in his appearance in that order, as he was looking downwards when he opened the door.

The visitor's face was smooth and rosy. Though he fanned it, it betrayed no sign of heat. His sparse grey hair was well pomaded. He wore gold pince-nez, through which he regarded Ellis with bland good-humour.

" Well, well, well ! " Ellis cried. " If it isn't our old friend Mr. Stuyvesant. The very man we want to see. How do you do, sir. Come right in."

The American surveyed him calmly. " You know me," he said, in level, musical tones, " but I don't know you."

" You soon will. *This* way."

" Thank you." Mr. Stuyvesant stepped across the threshold. " I called in to see Mr. Baildon."

" To the right. But I forgot : you know the way. My colleague, Mr. Gilkison. A chair. Shall I take your hat ? No : you prefer to use it as a fan. Well, Mr. Stuyvesant, if you want to see Matt, you're round about twenty-four hours too late."

Mr. Stuyvesant did not reply at once. There was excuse for him, since Ellis had rattled on like a machine gun. But, as they soon realised, he habitually allowed two or three seconds to elapse before he replied to anything.

" Why ? " he said. " Has he gone ? " (He pronounced it to rhyme with dawn.)

" He has indeed."

" You don't mean——"

" Mps. Do you recollect that bookcase—how it was stacked up to the ceiling ? Well—Matt Baildon was found dead on the floor, just by your left foot, with all those books on top of him. There they are. My colleague has been stacking them up."

Mr. Stuyvesant moved his left foot nearer its fellow. He showed the whites of his eyes, and blew out his pink cheeks in a soundless whistle.

" That's bad news," he said. " How'd it happen ? What fetched the books down ? "

" If we knew that, we could all go home."

Mr. Stuyvesant did some quick thinking. He looked at Ellis with a new light in his eye.

" You a dick ? "

" Got it in one," Ellis said. " Mr. Gilkison isn't. He's a bookseller. He's looking after that end of the business."

" Mr. Paul Gilkison, of Vigo Street ? "

" The one and only," Ellis answered.

The American bowed.

" I have your name on my list, Mr. Gilkison. It was given me by John Ling, of New York, but I haven't worked the metropolis yet."

" You realise, too," Ellis went on, " why your call is so opportune."

"Do I?" asked Mr. Stuyvesant, fanning himself.

"I think so. Yesterday afternoon, you paid a call on the deceased Matthew Baildon. It did not last very long. Taking umbrage at a suggestion of yours, he raised his voice, and requested you to bring the call to an end. You did so, promising to return. Am I right?"

"You are. Especially the bit about raising his voice."

Ellis screwed up his eyes.

"Did you return?"

"Sure." Mr. Stuyvesant made a wide gesture with his hat. "Here I am."

"Yes. But previously? Yesterday, for instance?"

"I did not."

"The point is of some importance."

"It certainly is," replied Mr. Stuyvesant quietly: and waited for Ellis to go on.

"What did you do yesterday afternoon, as soon as you left here?"

Mr. Stuyvesant considered.

"Do I have to answer that right now?" he enquired.

"No. But it will save a lot of time and trouble if you do. You can regard this as an informal conversation. We'll have it off the record, if you like; and you can make a formal statement at the police station afterwards, and have a lawyer to look after you."

Mr. Stuyvesant paused for longer than usual.

"I didn't kill the old guy," he said, "if that's what you mean."

"It's one of the things I mean," Ellis replied. "But you ran a sizeable risk of killing him."

"How d'you mean, I ran a risk of killing him?"

"Getting him into such a state. He had a dicky heart, had old Matt. Excitement was bad for him. You excited him, good and proper. From all accounts, he damn near had a fit."

For the first time, Mr. Stuyvesant showed signs of animation.

"I can't see what was biting the old cuss. I did nothing to account for the way he carried on."

"Oh yes, you did" Ellis wagged a finger at him. "You did a very wrong thing indeed. Most unethical."

The last word got under Mr. Stuyvesant's skin. He turned a richer shade of pink.

"How d'you get that?" he asked shortly.

"Do you think it fair play to get a letter of introduction to a man from his friend, induce him to show you his treasures,

and then offer to buy them? Fie, Mr. Stuyvesant. Fie, fie, and fie again. Not done. Not cricket. Not according to Cocker. Gross breach of hospitality. In fact, most unethical."

Mr. Stuyvesant surveyed him. His reply, when it came, had a considerable dignity.

"If I have unwittingly offended against the laws of British hospitality, I am extremely sorry. But I still don't understand what's wrong. I can't see that to make a man an honest commercial offer is a breach of hospitality. After all, he has only to refuse. Besides, when I made the offer, I had every reason to believe it would be acceptable"

"What on earth put that into your head?"

"I had information to that effect."

Ellis sat upright and stared at him.

"Whoever told you that? Not Sir George, I'll be bound."

Mr. Stuyvesant inclined his head.

"It was not Sir George Tweedy."

"Who, then?"

"A dealer. A bookseller."

Ellis and Gilkison exchanged looks.

"A bookseller?" Ellis leaned forward. "Would it be too much to ask you his name?"

"I don't see why you shouldn't have it."

He pulled out a wallet, opened it carefully, and took from it a card, which he held some distance away.

"Here you are. J. C. Nelder, 41 Cuffe Street, W.C.2."

Ellis whistled.

"That," he said, "is uncommonly interesting. You have no idea how interesting that is."

"May I enquire why?"

"Yesterday morning, when we arrived here, we encountered this same Mr. Nelder. Or rather, my colleague here did. As soon as Nelder heard his voice, he shot out of the hotel, and you couldn't see his behind for dust."

"Dust?" Mr. Stuyvesant did not immediately take the phrase "You mean, he beat it?"

"With extreme rapidity. Now, Mr. Stuyvesant, a very pretty question poses itself. What was Mr. J. C. Nelder, of Cuffe Street, W.C.2, doing in the Plume of Feathers, West Nattering?"

"I reckon I can guess," said Mr. Stuyvesant quietly. A hard depression showed at each corner of his mouth. "He was trying to raise the price on me."

Ellis stared at him. "Oh, I see. You suspect that he and the estimable Matt were in collusion. I don't think it is as

simple as that. Matt's tantrums were perfectly genuine. They weren't put on to make you offer more."

"So? What was Nelder doing, then?"

"That's what we'd like to know. You say Nelder definitely gave you to understand that Matt was selling the books you came to see?"

"Not those books in particular, but some books. He was open to offers. He might make a fuss, for form's sake; but he was open."

"Nelder told you that?"

"Certainly he did."

Ellis shook his head.

"It beats me. Gilk here has known Matt for years. Matt hasn't sold a book since the slump, and then he only parted with a few duplicates at a fabulous price."

"They weren't all duplicates," Gilkison corrected him. "Most of them were."

"If Matt had been selling, Gilk would have known. He sent for Gilk to value some of his books. It was Gilk who sold the others for him. Why call in Nelder—who's a crook, anyway?"

"If he wanted books valued," Mr. Stuyvesant argued, "doesn't that look as if he was thinking of selling?"

"I don't think so. He'd been in bed with a heart attack, and he wanted to be sure of certain present values, in case of an emergency."

"So's his widow wouldn't sell unwisely?"

"He never showed undue solicitude for his wife and daughter," Ellis said. "But he wouldn't like to think of his books fetching less than their value. Or he may have had other schemes. There's no knowing what was in his head. What I want to know is, what gave Nelder the idea that he would sell."

Mr. Stuyvesant shook his head politely. He was not interested in this aspect of the matter.

"Cuffe Street," Ellis said pointedly. "You said you hadn't been to London yet?"

"Nor I have. I met Nelder in Gloucester. I got the idea that he was some sort of crook," said Mr. Stuyvesant meditatively. "But I didn't see what harm he could do me, right there."

"You have a sweet, trusting nature. You think no ill."

"That is not my reputation in business circles at home."

"No? Well, well. By the way, you haven't told me yet what you did yesterday afternoon, as soon as you left the clamorous Matt."

"I've no objection to telling you that, gentlemen." Mr. Stuyvesant took his time over it. "First of all, I walked straight down the village, to cool off. I hadn't lost my temper, of course, or anything like that. But the interview had taken an unpleasant turn. I'm not accustomed to being ordered out of a house, and I'll admit I was a bit ruffled. I went down to where there's a little bridge over a creek——"

"Our river," Ellis interpreted to Gilkison, "of which we are so proud."

"—and I stood for a while and looked in the water and watched an old fish waving his tail. That sort of calmed me," said Mr. Stuyvesant, smiling good-humouredly, "and I tried to figure out what to do next. The thought came to me that maybe the old cuss was just holding out on me, and that, if I went back and offered him a bit more, the deal might be on. I gave him just about twice as long to cool off as it had taken me——"

"He had no fish to look at."

"He had no fish to look at. Then I went back."

"But you said——"

Mr. Stuyvesant held up a hand.

"I got near the gate, and then I thought, better not seem too enthusiastic. Leave him twenty-four hours to think it over. I didn't like to leave: it was a risk, and I certainly needed to have those books. I waited a little; then I went back to the station, and took the next train to Exeter."

"See anyone, while you were waiting?"

"You mean, did anyone see me?"

"Well——"

"I only saw one guy, and he saw me." Mr. Stuyvesant appeared to be embarrassed. "This bit doesn't sound too good. It's a bit too much like what I might think up to get myself out of a jam."

"I think I can help you out," Ellis said. "You're going to tell us that the guy you saw and who saw you was either going into Baildon's place, or coming out."

"How d'you get that?" Mr. Stuyvesant asked, surprised.

"We've had time to peek about a bit, since yesterday afternoon. Am I right?"

"You are. The guy was coming out of Baildon's place, and he was in one hell of a hurry."

"How did he strike you? What did he do?"

"I remember thinking at the time, he acted a bit queer. He looked up and down the road very quick, like he wanted to see if someone was watching. When he saw me, he sort of

checked, and gave me a good look. Then he went off down the little road at the side."

"What was he like?"

"Strong-looking guy: athletic. Broad shoulders. Clean shaven, and wore glasses. He had on a pair of gray trousers. I don't know about his coat, except that it was lighter."

He looked at Ellis.

"That make sense?"

Ellis nodded.

"Can you give us the time?"

"Pretty near. After I'd walked on a bit, I looked at my watch, to see about catching the train. It was twenty-five after three. I went straight to the station, and caught the ten to four train. They can verify that at the station, I guess."

"Right." Ellis got up, rubbing his hands together. "Well, Mr. Stuyvesant, we needn't keep you any longer. Going back to Exeter? Good. Staying there a while? Don't leave without letting us know where you're going, will you?"

"You don't want me to turn in a statement?"

"No. That'll be all for to-day, thanks. Pleasant journey. Don't worry too much."

For some reason this seemed to silence Mr. Stuyvesant. He allowed Ellis to shepherd him out and down the passage: and the farewells were brief.

"Well, well." Ellis came back, puffing out his cheeks, and still rubbing his hands. "We have more and more to say to our Mr. Nelder."

"When you find him."

"Oh, we'll find him all right, don't you worry. Now; you get on with your job, while I go up and do a bit of snooping."

"I don't envy you."

"I don't much like it myself. However—off we go."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELLIS stood in the doorway of Joan Baidon's room, fingering his chin.

He crossed to the window, which was open top and bottom, pulled aside the flimsy white curtains that swayed gently in and out with the breeze, stuck his head out, and made sure that he could see the little drive. He withdrew his head, propped the door open with a large book, and stood by the foot of the bed, again fingering his chin.

Then, with almost unbelievable quickness, he began his search. First he tried the chest of drawers. Delicately, without deranging them, he ran his fingers through the piles of cheap, mended underwear, feeling for the bundle which, he was sure, was stowed away somewhere in the room.

Three minutes took him through the chest of drawers. There was no letters there. Joan had no desk. Her wardrobe held nothing but a few frocks. There were some boxes on top of it: they looked dirty. Ellis hesitated, then, with a fat grimace, reserved them for the end.

Matt's books were everywhere. The child had one bookcase of her own, however. Ellis's eyes brightened: each row of books was double. The two top rows were small, and, from his point of view, improbable. The bottom rows were tall. He pulled out a few books. No, there were books behind. Another few—ah! the light fell dimly on the brown woodwork of a box.

Ellis pulled away the books, and lifted the box out to the light of day. It was shaped like the top of a small desk, old and scarred, with a lock of inlaid mother-o'-pearl. Ellis shook the box. It was heavy, and the contents slithered about smoothly.

He put it on the bed, pulled out a fat knife with a multiplicity of gadgets, selected one, fiddled delicately at the lock, and in less than a minute had it open. The contents, as he expected, were letters, some done up in bundles, some singly, and one or two still in their original envelopes. One of them, postmarked Frinton and dated from years earlier, came from the tenor of a pierrot troupe, in answer to a youthful letter of admiration. Another was from an author, another from the comedian of a pantomime. This one surprised him. Boys, more often than girls, admire low comedians.

Ellis flipped the single letters over quickly, and examined the bundles. He gave a grunt of satisfaction. The fattest of them was labelled "E." Two others, marked respectively "M" and "G," he discarded after the briefest examination. They came from school friends. He picked up a long envelope marked "D," and tipped out its contents. They came from Rattray; there was no doubt about that. The first two or three began "Dear Miss Baildon"; one started off without addressing her, and the three last said "My Dears": but that was all that Ellis got from them. Without exception, they were short notes cancelling lessons or changing the hour. The last, referring to the vagaries of "she," showed that the two correspondents had discussed Ursula Rattray with some

freedom: but the letters told Ellis far less than he knew already.

He replaced them in the box, and started on the packet labelled "E." These were far more promising, and in a couple of minutes Ellis was absorbed. He read fast, skipping, but missing nothing essential. By degrees a comical expression of disgust grew on his face. Impatient exclamations came from him, clickings of the tongue, explosions of breath: his nose wrinkled as at an unpleasant smell, and the exclamations crystallised into epithets discreditable to Eunice Caunter.

Then, as he picked up yet another letter from the pile, his whole body stiffened into attention. He turned the page, took a deep breath, read on, and burst into a gasp of protest.

"Oh no. No. This is too much."

He set the letter aside, and hurried through the rest. After he had finished, he sat for a few minutes looking at nothing: then he put all the letters together, with the exception of the one he had set aside, which he pocketed. He replaced the band, put the letters back in the box, locked it, and restored it to its place, taking care not to move the dust on top of the books. Joan had chosen a good hiding-place, obvious to an experienced searcher, but perfect for her purpose. The last things likely to attract Matt's attention would be the Girls' Annuals and Bumper Books, the relics of his daughter's earlier years.

He looked round the room with a grimace of pity, and went downstairs. Gilkison was still at work, proceeding at the same unhurried pace. Not till Ellis stood in front of him and grunted did he take any notice of his arrival. Even then, he did not look up.

"Well," he said. "How's the dirty work?"

"Very dirty."

Ellis paused expectantly. Then, as Gilkison said nothing, he went on:

"There's a fat bunch of letters from that wench of yours."

Gilkison turned over a flyleaf, and made a note in his book.

"What wench?"

"That sexy piece with the moustache. The one you got so excited about. The schoolmistress. I don't think much of your taste, Gilk. Not a nice girl. Not a nice girl at all."

"I suppose this sort of thing amuses you."

"It doesn't amuse me a bit. She's no good. She's damn' bad for that poor girl. You ought to see those letters. All intense and gooey and squarmy—if they're no worse."

Gilkison looked up.

"Are you suggesting——?"

"Emotional vampirism. The woman has no drama in her life, so she vamps up her personal relationships. Bad enough among adults, but damnable with a child. Hitting below the belt. Nagging. Doing the 'don't you love me' stuff. No wonder there's all that strain—particularly if Joan's fond of the creature."

"All very interesting, I'm sure," Gilkison commented acidly, "but I can't see that it advances you very far."

"Can't you though. What do you say to this?"

He pulled out the letter from his pocket, and began to read.

"'Darling Joanikins, I am *longing* to get my arms around you and have a real good talk.' There—I thought that would get you. Bad luck, Gilk. She loves another."

"Really, Ellis. Sometimes you are quite insufferable."

"Shut up. I'll miss out a page or two, in deference to your feelings. Here we are. 'Joanie dearest—when shall I kill your father for you? Honestly, it seems the only thing I can do for you, now! (Got the force of that 'now'? Now that Rattray is on the job.) 'I've often planned how I'd do it. I'd go in, as bold as brass, one day when you're both out, and he's sitting in his room reading. He'll be so deep in his book, he'll never hear me. Shall I hit him over the head from behind, with a mallet or a hammer? Perhaps that would be messy, and I can't bear blood. And he'd have horrid blood. No'—listen to this, Gilk—'perhaps it would be better to strangle him in his muffler. One would only have to get the two ends, and pull, and pull, and pull. I'd crouch down, so as not to pull the chair over backwards. It would be very quick, I feel sure. Then I'd push over all that case of books on top of him, and he'd be so crushed and buried that everyone would think that was what had killed him. Then I'd slip out by the back way, and no one would know, and you and your mother would come back and find yourselves free, free for always.'"

He looked up.

"Now then. What do you think of that?"

If his aim had been to impress Gilkison, he had certainly succeeded. The bookseller's pale face was long with concern.

"But, good heavens, Ellis! This is serious."

"It is. Damn' serious."

"Do you believe she did it?"

"Not she. But"—he tapped the letter—"this wouldn't do her any good with a jury. Remember Mrs. Thompson—Thompson and Bywaters? It's a dangerous letter, all right.

Old Bradstreet won't half look solemn at it. And, if we put it in at the inquest——"

"Ellis. I don't understand you. If you don't believe she did it, what are you——"

"The serious part of this letter, my good fool, is its possible effect on Joan. *Now*, do you see?"

"Good God, Ellis. You mean, it might have put it into her head?"

"Never mind about that. It'd be quite bad enough to think that her friend actually did it. Carried out the plan. A terrible letter to have in one's possession, now that Matt's dead."

"When was it written?"

"Don't know. Fool of a girl writes 'Tuesday' and things like that on her letters. It's since Rattray began coaching Joan—we get that from the 'now': it can't mean anything else, that I can see—and he's told us that was ten months ago."

"Joan may have forgotten it, then."

"Would you forget a letter like that—from someone you thought a lot of—in view of what's happened?"

"Has she been at the letters, since it happened? She might, to refresh her memory."

"Refresh' is good. She might, but I don't think she would. I saw no sign of it, anyway."

"What will she do, if she goes to them, and finds the letter isn't there?"

"That we shall have to see. I mean to keep a pretty close watch on Joan Baildon. Poor child! what a load to lay on her."

He walked over to the window, and looked out.

"How much longer are you going to be grubbing about here? I want my tea."

"I'll come and have some with you. But I must come back here again afterwards. You don't realise what a lot I have to get through."

"You're not going to try to value them all?"

"Not this time. But I want to check over the most important items, and get an idea of the extent of the library."

"How many books had the old devil got?"

"Between thirteen and fourteen thousand, I should think."

"God. That ought to fetch some money for those two. Gilk?"

"Yes."

"I don't *like* this case."

" I can understand that."

" One thing we've got now, anyway."

" What ? "

" Why those two—Rattray and your bit of skirt—are so cagey about each other. They're jealous as hell."

" Over Joan, do you mean ? "

" Yes. Each goes all tense when the other's mentioned. Rattray, the professional Christian, tries to be fair, but his foot stops tapping. The girl doesn't try to be fair. She gets at Joan in her letters."

" Aren't you reading a lot into the one word ' now ' ? "

" I tell you, she keeps harping on it. Go upstairs and read for yourself."

Gilkison drew himself together with a fastidious shudder.

" No thanks. I'm quite content to take your word for it."

" A pretty kettle of fish. I don't like it ; but it's damned interesting. Come on ; let's get our tea."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AFTER TEA, Gilkison returned to his work, and Ellis went up to the station to see how Bradstreet was getting on.

The Inspector had not come back, so Ellis engaged in a long conversation with the sergeant, who, to his unbounded delight, turned out to be a gramophone enthusiast. When Bradstreet returned, he found them deep in a discussion of West Country singers, the general paucity of their records, and the sad fact that so few were still listed in the catalogues.

" Charles Saunders," lamented the Sergeant. " I 'eard 'im frequent. A lovely singer : and not a record left. I've never even yerd one."

" I have one," said Ellis, " but only one."

" Frank Webster. There was a brave tenor, now : and I 'aven't but the one record of 'im."

" I heard him with Tetrizzini, 'way back. I was only a boy."

The Sergeant saw Bradstreet, and rose respectfully. Ellis looked up.

" Hallo, Bradstreet. Well, Sergeant—you must come and hear some of my records, when you're next in town. Bradstreet—your sergeant is a very intelligent man. He collects records, and has all kinds of sound ideas. Promote him at once."

The Sergeant reddened to an incredible colour. Bradstreet smiled easily.

"All right. Go off and get some tea."

"Well, you old devil," said Ellis, as soon as they were alone. "How did it go?"

"Pretty much as you expected, I reckon, or you wouldn't have asked me to do it."

"Bradders! Bradders! I never thought to hear you speak such bitter words."

Bradstreet fished in his pocket, produced a large spectacle case, and put the glasses on his nose. He took out his notebook, licked his thumb, and turned the pages. Ellis watched him with affectionate delight.

"Mr. Pawle had nothing, except that he confirmed the bit about handing the paper over the wall. He never posted any letter for the old man."

"Stevens said the girl came in for half a pound of petty—what d'you call 'em—biscuits: showed me the order."

"The vicar had nothing. He looked in once when Matt was ill, but only for a short time; and he posted no letters."

"Miss Jenkinson said that Mrs. Baildon was with her for upwards of half an hour. She isn't positive of the time, but knows Mrs. Baildon left before four, because she pressed her to stay for tea, which she has round about four or ten past." He looked up. "Did you get confirmation of Mrs. Baildon's statement from Miss Attwill?"

Ellis grinned.

"I got a lot from Miss Attwill, but not that."

"You mean she didn't confirm it?"

"I didn't trouble to ask her. She's heart and soul for those two. She'd swear anything to shield 'em. As good as told me so. Don't worry about that. We can clear it up, if we want to."

Bradstreet once more consulted his notebook.

"Old Exworthy. She gave me sauce to start with, so I had to scare her a bit. I'm pretty sure she didn't post anything to Nelder."

"A good afternoon's work, Bradders. Very good."

"I'm glad you think so." Bradstreet shut his notebook and put it away. "Did you get anything?"

"I got plenty. Whether it's any good is another matter."

He told Bradstreet of his interviews, and of the search in Joan's bedroom, and finally handed him Eunice Caunter's letter.

Bradstreet read it slowly. His face became grave.

"Ah," he said. "A very awkward letter. Very awkward indeed."

"Shall we put it in at the inquest?"

The Inspector rubbed his moustache. He gave Ellis a quick glance, and was met with a broad grin.

"All right, Bradders, I shan't cry, if you crab my wonderful, wonderful find. You *are* a lamb."

Relief beamed over Bradstreet's face. As often in moments of feeling, his speech broadened.

"I was going to say, I don't reckon 'twould be really fair, without we were minded to follow it up."

Ellis shook his head decisively. "She didn't do it. But the letter has a nasty follow up. More than one, in fact."

"Why I don't think we ought to put it in," Bradstreet continued, following the line of his thought, "she's not too well liked hereabouts, isn't Miss Caunter, and the jury, being anxious to clear the Baildons, might read more into that letter than what you or I would."

"There's another reason, you old ruffian," Ellis pointed at him. "You wouldn't want to put it in, no matter how much the village loved Miss Caunter. People might think it had put ideas into someone's head. I know you can trust your local jury, but——"

"I don't think you ought to say that," Bradstreet protested. "If I thought it was my duty to put the letter in, I'd put it in. But, as things are——"

"I know you would, you 'old idiot. But you wouldn't want to. Which—please—is all I said. Get out, man! Don't you dare to take umbrage at me."

Bradstreet's brow cleared. He grinned, a shade ruefully.

"This thing *has* got me worried, I won't deny. It may seem funny to you, but we're jealous for our good name, in these parts."

"I know. Three complete strangers have seen fit to button-hole me, and assure me that the only local sources of sin are the aerodrome and the camp."

"And, of course, knowing the Baildons personally——"

"Yes. Horrid job, ours, sometimes, isn't it?"

"It's got to be done."

"Of course it has. And, most of the time, you like it. Don't you, now?"

"I can't say I think much about it, one way or the other. I'm not what you'd call a thinking man. At least, I suppose—I don't know." He looked up at Ellis. "I reckon I just go ahead with the job in hand."

"Thank heaven you do. No police force, no army, no navy, no country could be run if there weren't a number of people so constituted. What's troubling you? D'you look on that as a drawback?"

Bradstreet's brow was corrugated.

"I can't help feeling one ought to be able to do both. Think about the job, and yet do it."

"Which is just what you're doing now. It isn't always pleasant, that's all. Well—we can't do any more to-night. I'm going home."

"So am I, in a few minutes. I've a trifle or two to clear up first."

"See you soon, then. Glad you don't want to put in that letter." Ellis chuckled. "You ought to have seen your own face, when I gave it to you."

"I was a bit worried, I allow."

"Thought I thought I'd made a find, and was carrying on like a hen that had laid an egg."

"I don't reckon you're much like a hen," Bradstreet began gravely—and broke off, as Ellis pretended to aim a blow at him, and went out.

As soon as he got back to the Plume of Feathers, Ellis went up to his room and began a long letter to his wife. It was his habit, when working away from home, to send her a resumé of the case on which he was engaged, partly because she was interested, and partly to clear his own mind. The necessity for giving someone else a vivid picture of the circumstances and characters often brought out ideas which were lurking in the background, and gave a significance to things which he had not consciously noticed. The practice had its dangers. Attempted too soon, it could head his ideas in the wrong direction, and he had always to fight against the tendency to make a good story. But, once he had reached a certain point in a case, the writing became a necessity, both giving shape to the mass of collected detail, and a lens through which to view it.

For some forty minutes Ellis wrote fast and steady. His handwriting was curiously round and unformed, and gave a deceptive air of candour to what he wrote. At Oxford, his tutor had more than once urged him to cultivate some degree of illegibility, or at least a few mannerisms, lest examiners, finding his work easy to read, should suppose that there was nothing in it. Ellis had managed a mannerism or two, but no illegibility at all. An increase in speed had not detracted from the blank simplicity of his script. The hand of an idiot child,

Kathleen called it : and the facial contortions accompanying its production, the frown, the tongue curled round the left-hand corner of the mouth, added a further plausibility to her picture.

By degrees, the pace of the writing slowed. Ellis stopped between sentences, looked out of the window, scowled, started determinedly again, only to stop once more. He put down his pen, squeezed his fat chin, and stared from bulbous eyes.

"Damn !"

With a simian grimace, he picked up his pen, and wrote faster than ever.

"You see now why I don't like the smell of this case. The Bradder doesn't like it either, and with even better reason, poor chap. On a cold view of the facts, there is only one place to look, and neither of us wants to look there. Put down on paper, nothing else will make sense. With one exception, the reasons pointing away don't amount to a row of beans, compared with all that points there. We must be damned careful, my girl. Damned careful. An idea one hates can be just as fascinating as one that seems absolutely irresistible.

"What are the indications worth ? How much is there that brands us as crass sentimentalists for not wanting to follow where it points ? For, unless something quite fresh turns up, for anyone else to have killed Matt would be sheer altruism, or a fluke.

"1. Self-interest bulks a good deal larger as a motive than altruism : and you know what I think of the story-book killer who crams a murder into twenty seconds, on the spur of the moment, when people's backs are turned, in circumstances he couldn't possibly have foreseen.

"2. Of the two people concerned, only one has an alibi, and that none too good. One party to it can't swear to the time, and 'tother would swear to anything. The distances are short, too.

"3. Lack of motive apart, why should anyone come in from outside and bump off Matt while his daughter was about the place ? (And, unless the murderer were a friend, and knew Mrs. B. would be out, she might have been there, too.)

"No : there's every reason to look inside the house, and none to look outside. Now let's have a squint at t'other side of the picture.

"1. The doctor *could* have done it, either before he was called in, or after. If the latter, Matt could have had another heart attack, and Carter could have finished him off.

"2. The schoolmistress might have done it, on the strength

of her letter, or her often expressed hostility to the old man.

" 3. Rattray *could* have done it, and perhaps *might* have done it, during his call to return the book.

" 4. Since he can't prove he didn't return to the house, the American *could* have done it. Less improbably, he might have so infuriated Matt by a second visit that the old boy had a seizure, and someone else was inspired to finish the job.

" 5. An unspecified number of people, possibly including Nelder, if he can't prove he was elsewhere, could have got in and done it.

" 6. If the job was a home job, why wait till the old boy got up, instead of popping him off earlier, when there was every chance of getting away with it?

" 7. There still remains the first probability that it was an accident.

" Now of these seven considerations, imposing though they are in bulk, only one is worth a damn. The trouble is, as you'll have seen, there's no *evidence* at all. Motive by the bucketful, opportunity galore, but not a tittle of evidence as to the pair of hands that pulled tight old Matt's muffler and tipped the tomes on his unlovely nob.

" I can't definitely rule out the outside suspects, because of this same blasted lack of evidence, but I class 'em all as non-starters on psychological grounds. Now, now! None of your sniffing. Listen, girl.

" Carter I won't have, because he's an honest physician, and honest physicians don't bump off their patients. He's violent and testy, and might kill a man in a fight, but he wouldn't harm a frail old man under his professional care, to whose tantrums he was well accustomed.

" Eunice Caunter (a nasty bit of work! I'd love you to see her) I won't have, because this killing isn't in her character. She could plan it—she did, in fancy—but never carry it out. What's more, she has no motive. She *might* do it to regain a commanding place in Joan's affections and win the lead back from Rattray: but that, again, is a story-book sort of motive, and I've never met it in practice.

" Rattray could kill all right, but only if he was worked up to a frenzy or scared out of his wits. He'd never plan. If he were the cold type of killer, he's had the ideal victim in his house for years. So I pass by Rattray.

" The American didn't do it. One, he isn't the sort: two, he'd nothing to gain. Exit Mr. Stuyvesant.

" I don't back any dark horses, either, in the shape of tradesmen or strangers. Why the hell? The possibility that

someone called in and so angered Matt that he had a seizure and was polished off by a third party, has something to recommend it : but, if anything, it tells against the home team, both on grounds of motive and opportunity.

"No, the only argument for the home team is No. 6. Why, if they were going to do it at all, didn't they do it before? What was there special about Friday afternoon? Nothing that we know of, except the fact that Gilkie had come. Was there anything to make his arrival dangerous to any of the parties concerned? He'd come to value certain books. 'By the pricking of my thumbs'—sweetheart, I *don't* like this case. Unless we find something new and quite unexpected, things look poorly for the home team : and I fear me that anything new we find isn't going to help them. Contrariwise.

"I've no doubt, of course, that the Coroner's jury will run true to form : but—well——"

He shrugged, grimaced again, and passed on to personal matters. Ending with a flourish, he addressed the envelope, licked it vigorously, thumped down the flap with his fist, and trotted downstairs.

"'E won't go 'fore to-morrow, not now, sir," the porter told him.

"Doesn't matter. I want to be shut of it."

They smiled at each other, and Ellis hurried off to the pillar box. He was afraid that, at any moment, he might have to add a postscript to the letter.

Dinner was a silent meal. Gilkison was preoccupied with the books, Ellis with his thoughts. They went into the lounge for their coffee, a weird place of wicker chairs, glass-topped tables, and tall tobacco plants.

From it they could hear the cheerful Saturday night uproar from the bar. As soon as they had drunk their coffee, Ellis got up. "I'm going into the bar. Coming?"

"My dear Ellis. You'll be most unpopular."

"Take a bet on it?"

Gilkison sat back in his chair.

"I should be obliged to come and see you lose it."

"Funk."

"I haven't your thickness of skin."

Ellis started off. Catching sight of a periodical on one of the tables, he picked it up, and brought it back to Gilkison.

"Here you are, love," he cried in a shrill falsetto, and threw it into his lap. Gilkison started, and looked apprehensively around him. It was a ladies' fashion journal. Before he could remonstrate, Ellis was out of range.

Ellis padded off down the passage, reached the door, squared his shoulders, pushed it open, and walked in.

The result was as dramatic as the most hardened showman could desire. Conversation and hubbub stopped, almost at once. A few men, who did not see him, went on for a couple of seconds, noticed the cessation of talk, saw him, and fell silent too.

Ellis behaved as if he noticed nothing.

"A pint, please," he said, in loud, cheerful tones. Everyone stared while it was drawn, and all eyes watched him as he took it to a table and sat down. Those nearest him drew away in alarm.

In his element, Ellis looked around the bar, inspected the pictures on the walls, sipped his beer, and whistled to himself under his breath. By degrees, the conversation started again : but it was hushed and guarded. His presence oppressed them all : he could feel them drawing together protectively against the invader.

In a corner, against the wall farthest from Ellis, stood a piano. Ellis eyed it, and his spirit rose in him to a peak of arrogance and daring. For a while he stayed where he was, to see if by any chance the atmosphere would improve. Then he got up, and, taking his glass tankard with him, walked deliberately across to the piano.

The moment he moved, silence fell again. All the eyes followed him. Ellis put his beer on top of the piano, sat down, and opened it.

"No one seems to have much to say," he said to the piano. "Let's have a little music."

He struck a series of resounding chords, dashed up to the treble in a flamboyant arpeggio, then shot into a popular tune. The rhythm was so strong, so gay, that in spite of themselves their senses were hypnotised into obedience. Sitting there at the piano, Ellis could feel the atmosphere loosen. From one tune he went to another, with an impudence, a certainty of attack that electrified his unwilling listeners. He gave them ten minutes of it, then led into a chorus song. No one joined in. He hummed himself, then sang the chorus alone.

At the end, without taking his hands from the keys, he swung round on his chair and laughed in their stupefied faces.

"Come on, you swabs," he cried, and his fingers flew from a wild flourish into *The Lily of Laguna*.

It was touch and go. For a few bars they hung back : then a couple of voices started, tentatively. By the end of the first chorus, half of them were in. Ellis took it again, singing fat

harmonies, and with a rising roar they all came in. From that moment he gave them no rest, whirling them from chorus to chorus till at last he banged a final terrific chord and lunged round on the chair, shouting with laughter in which they joined. Then, with a rush, came orders for a fresh round of drinks, and everyone was laughing and talking at once. Three or four pressed forward, grinning all across their faces, in their anxiety to assure him.

"We reckoned you was comin' in to try and find summat out."

"Snoopin' round, like."

"Lord love you," Ellis cried. "Aren't you going to give me any time off? Can't I even have my evenings free?"

A man with a moustache edged closer.

"D'you really reckon, mister——"

Ellis held up his hand.

"No. No shop, please. Not a word. I'm off duty now."

The rest laughed, and the would-be questioner grinned sheepishly, and shrank back discomfited.

"Don't you ever have sing-songs here?" Ellis asked them.

"No? Why not?"

"Nobody to play."

"Rubbish. Must be somebody. You don't mean to tell me that, in this whole village, there's nobody who can play the piano!"

There were two or three, it appeared, but they were females or didn't patronise the bar.

"You ought to have all sorts of songs. Who sings solo? Who's in the choir?"

One or two bashful individuals were gleefully pointed out by their friends.

"Well—damn it—what's the good of being in the choir, if you never sing a solo? Why don't you rope in that school-master bloke? He's got a good voice. I heard him, in his garden."

They looked at each other.

"Can't often get he. He's busy most evenin's." They detailed Rattray's activities in the village and at the camp.

"'E don't finish up there, not till nine o'clock," one man volunteered.

"Oh well—we'll have to do without him. I'll start you off. Who's going to be here to-morrow night? Sunday's a bad night, is it? All right: what about Monday?"

On Monday, it seemed, several were going to one of Rattray's affairs at the Institute.

"Very well. Tuesday then. That is, if it's too late for you after nine?"

Yes. They thought it was. After nine, they liked to go home.

"Us got to be up early in the mornin', master."

"Not like me, eh? Hogging it in bed. All right. Tuesday it is, then. Mind you come, every man jack of you, and we'll have the roof off."

He waited a little longer, then withdrew, to a cordial chorus of good-nights, and returned to Gilkison, well pleased with himself.

"You've been kicking up a filthy row out there," Gilkison told him.

A look of intolerable complacency came over Ellis's face.

"I got 'em," he said. "I made 'em eat out of my hand. And I got something valuable as well."

"What was that?"

"Remember Mrs. Rattray telling us that darling hubby didn't get back till ten on the nights he does his good works? Well—the good works finish at nine, leaving an hour off, for fun and games."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

NEXT MORNING Ellis announced his intention of going to church. Gilkison, sensitive to a notoriety in which he could not help sharing, refused to accompany him, and called him an exhibitionist.

Ellis rebutted the charge with characteristic offensiveness, and went off in high spirits to sit at the feet of Mr. Rawlings.

If the churchgoers did not react to his arrival as markedly as the Plume of Feathers' customers the night before, it was only because their surroundings forbade it. The sensation caused was, if anything, greater. Between those who frankly stared, and those who resolutely looked in front of them, Ellis achieved as much attention from pew and choir-stall as if he were a gorilla.

Several of Ellis's new friends of the pub were there, making violent efforts not to seem aware of him. One, the verger who handed him a prayer-book, was scarlet with embarrassment. Martha Attwill was in the front of the choir, looking happy and unconcerned. Rattray wheeled his wife in at the side door just before the service began. Stiff and resolute, he took care not to look in Ellis's direction.

The constraint lasted even after the service had begun, since Ellis joined heartily in the opening hymn, his confident tenor being heard all over the little church. The congregation and choir rallied and sang their loudest, stimulated perhaps, or else determined to put the intruder in his place. To do Ellis justice, he did not sing in order to draw attention to himself, but unself-consciously and from good will. One of the puzzles of Gilkison's life was to know when Ellis was showing off and when he was naïvely unaware of the effect he was producing. Even Kathleen, Ellis's wife, did not always know.

The West Nattering choir sang simply and pleasantly, and the organist, Ellis decided, was really good. He found himself enjoying the service. A village church or a school chapel—those were the places where he liked best to attend service. His ideal, for communal worship, was to make a cheerful noise unto the God of Jacob, and the genuinely devout strain in his nature found its most natural expression in a straightforward and simple ritual.

Happy, the worries of the case forgotten, he sat upright, twiddling his thumbs, and noted with approval the advent of an elderly and most respectable looking man to read the first lesson. The elderly man did not hurry himself. He took out a spectacle case, opened it, put the spectacles carefully on his nose, announced the lesson, and then looked over the top of his spectacles until the congregation had found the place in their Bibles or settled themselves into an attitude of attention. He then repeated the chapter and verse, and delivered, in tones of respectful fervour, a passage from one of the lesser prophets, which, to Ellis, meant nothing at all, and could hardly have meant more to the congregation.

It sounded well, though, Ellis decided: and none of the congregation would like it any the less for not knowing what it was about. The woes prophesied to some city long since dust had for them the one great quality of bearing no possible relationship to their own lives. They could listen disinterestedly, and, when a year had passed, they could hear the same words again, part of the seasons' rhythm, a brief, recurrent experience in the cycle of the turning globe.

The vicar read the second lesson, a miracle and a parable from St. Matthew, and its immediate simplicity was in perfect contrast to the remoter resonance that had come first. He read it with a note of childlike wonder, as if he had never seen it before, and Ellis wished that he had gone to see the vicar himself, instead of handing that duty over to Bradstreet.

When, presently, Mr. Rawlings made allusion to the recent fatality, and solicited the congregation's prayers for the bereaved, Ellis's mood of admiration received a jolt. The immediate reaction of the hearers was patent too. A soundless stiffening, a withdrawal of the mind. No one there but knew that Matt Baildon's death was a mercy and a relief to the wife and daughter he left behind him.

Then, within three or four seconds, they yielded themselves once more to the exhortation of the single voice. The vicar was neither cynical nor foolish. He was doing the conventional thing, the thing he would always do, because the Church prescribed it : and, even if the sense of it went a little awry, was it not fitting to pray for those two souls, who had suffered a great deal, and were by no means clear of their troubles yet, and needed all the goodwill that might come to them from earth or from heaven ? So the congregation acquiesced, and Ellis found himself relaxing with them into the warmth of a better wisdom and a higher common sense.

By the time they had sung another hymn, and Mr. Rawlings had slowly climbed into the pulpit, Ellis's faith in him was fully restored, and he sat back expectantly. The sermon did not disappoint him. It was short, obvious, and applicable to the life of everyone present, from the gnarled ancient who bent over a stick in the front row to the little vacant-eyed children who looked around, open-mouthed, beside their elders, and made no attempt to take it in. For that matter, no one seemed to listen. Perhaps for them the discourse was only a part of the ritual, a recognised part of the occasion's furniture, so to speak, like the pulpit, the voluntary, and the taking round of the plate. But, if they did listen, they would get nothing but good : a good that depended less on the thing said, sound and homely though it was, than on the quality that radiated steadfastly from the man who said it.

Ellis's acquaintance of the night before, who had given him his prayer book, had to encounter him once more with the plate. Ellis, singing lustily, dropped half a crown in it, suddenly caught sight of the man's crimson protruding ears, and all but burst out laughing.

The organist played them out of church with Bach's " Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," and Ellis, delighted, made his way round to offer his congratulations. She proved to be a girl of about twenty-three or four. Shy at first, she thawed out in the warmth of his approval. They talked music hard, and the girl only became self-conscious again when they came outside and walked slowly towards the lych gate, a target for the eyes

of those who, by the immemorial custom of all villagers, stood outside the church to talk and stare.

Suddenly aware of the change in the girl's manner, and her anxiety to get away, Ellis saw the onlookers. He bade her good-bye, once more loudly congratulating her on her playing, turned on the onlookers a stare with which their own could not compete, and set off up the road. Damn the fools, he thought. Why couldn't they forget his trade and look on him as a human being, for one day in the week at least?

Then his brow cleared, and the effect of the service was reinstated in his mind. It had done him good: real good. Ellis drew a deep breath, hit himself upon the chest, looked round upon the morning, and decided that it was fair. He realised, too, where his feet were taking him. He would go to the Baidons', ostensibly to see how Gilk was getting on, but really in the hope of a word with Joan.

He found Gilkison busy in the front room, and looking as if he had never stopped since the evening before.

"Where are the women?" Ellis asked, after contemplating him for a moment.

"I've no idea."

"Fat lot of help you are."

"About as helpful to you as you are to me."

"It's twenty past twelve. At ten to one I'll come and fetch you back to your Sunday dinner."

"Run away till then."

It was useless to retort at him. Ellis sniffed, and went out into the passage. He stood, and cocked an ear. Culinary sounds indicated that someone was in the kitchen. Probably Mrs. Baidon. In that case, Joan might be in the garden. He could have looked over the hedge, but, if he had seen her, she might equally well have seen him, and retreated: and he wanted, if possible, to take her off her guard.

The back door was open. Ellis went noiselessly past the kitchen window. He need not have bothered: the occupant turned on a tap, and could not have heard anything short of a fall over the dustpan and brush that stood against the wall.

He went out boldly, knowing that, till he reached the currant bushes and the raspberry canes, he was in full view of the window. With any luck, her back would be turned.

A path twisted through the bushes. He followed it, and came suddenly upon Joan. The girl was lying in a deck chair, her long bare legs up on a stool.

Seeing him, she started, took down her feet, and sat up.

She flushed, and for a couple of seconds he thought she was going to harden against him.

"Don't disturb yourself. I'll sit on this."

He took the stool, and smiled at her with such obvious friendliness that she smiled back, and half relaxed.

Ellis nodded towards her book.

"Reading? Or working?"

"Working."

"You looked as if you were enjoying it."

"It is interesting," she said defensively.

He held out his hand, and she gave him the book. It was on Drama, and she had it open at the Restoration. Ellis flipped over the pages.

"Etheredge—Vanbrugh—Sedley. Don't expect they let you read them in the original, do they?"

She blushed again, and her eyes answered the twinkle in his. "Father has some of them."

"Ever read Sedley's *Mulberry Gardens*? Some fine talk in that. Chap talking about his girl to another chap, who's throwing cold water on the affair. Second chap asks how old she is. Lover says, seventeen. T'other chap says, 'I have drunk excellent Hockamore of that age.' Grand answer: 'Damn thy dull Hockamore, and thy base jaded Pallatt, that affects it.' They knew how to talk in those days. Little bit further down, they're talking about fate and their stars, and one says, 'The stars are pretty twinkling rogues, that light us home sometimes when we are drunk, but they care not for you or me.' Always stuck in my mind, that scene did. You ought to read it."

"I'll look out for it. There is an edition of Sedley, upstairs."

"When d'you go up to Oxford? October?"

"I hope so. That is——"

"I hope so too."

He looked at her. Shyly still, but steadily, she met his gaze. Her manner was so different from the last time that he decided Miss Attwill had been talking to her, and blessed the instinct that had led him to interview the aunt first.

"I had a great time with your aunt," he said. "I think she's a darling."

Joan smiled. "She said you were a cheeky toad."

"I know. But I fancy she'd rather have cheeky toads than respectful ones."

"Yes."

"You know," Ellis said, "ours is a rotten job, in some ways."

Everyone looks on us as a natural enemy—yes, even the innocent. It's astonishing, the way people draw together when they see a policeman. I'm not sure they're not even more frightened of us in plain clothes than in uniform. But none of 'em will ever treat us as human beings. That's one reason why I fell in love with auntie. She didn't take me for an enemy. Not even when I asked her the most embarrassing questions."

He could see she was trying to picture the scene.

"What did she do?"

"The worst question of all—the one really embarrassing one—she answered right away, and told the truth, when she needn't have at all. The others she either didn't answer, or warned me that, if she did answer, the answers would be lies."

"That's just like auntie," Joan said, her eyes alight behind the big lenses.

"Yes. She treated me as if I were human: and she believed me when I said I hoped it would all clear up properly. For you and your mother, I mean."

The ground was very delicate now. Ellis wondered if he had brought the subject up too soon. Joan looked down at her hands. She seemed to be hesitating whether to speak or not. He kept quiet, making himself receptive, creating as it were a vacuum into which her words could come.

"All the same," she said at last, "if we'd done it, you'd want to catch us and to hang us."

"I never want to hang anybody," Ellis said. "What's the sense of it?"

"Well, then, why——?"

"I didn't make the law. What the law does to the people I catch isn't my affair. I only *want* to catch them if they're a danger to society, or in order to protect innocent people who may fall under suspicion. As in this case."

"Yes." She wriggled in the chair. "But you can't get out of it as easily as that. After all, you don't need to be a detective."

"A policeman is like a soldier. The state decides this, that, and t'other. He has to obey. He mayn't always like it, but he has no choice. I've a certain talent for this kind of thing—at least, my superiors seem to think so—and I earn my daily bread at it. However—to-day you can look on me as off duty; we won't talk about this business at all. Then you needn't be afraid what you say to me."

"You might lay a trap for me," she smiled at him.

"I won't. You'll see I won't."

"If you aren't going to talk about what's happened, or to lay traps for me, why have you come?"

"I wanted to see you, and get to know you, just as I wanted to see auntie and get to know her. The way I work—since for the moment you make me talk about it—the way I work isn't so much to burrow about with a magnifying glass looking for clues and finger-prints. I do that, of course, or whoever's with me does it, because I'm not particularly good at it. The way I work, and the part of the job I have most talent for, is to get to know the people concerned in a case, and get the feel and the character of it all. I've often been able to say, quite positively, that someone didn't do a thing, in spite of all the evidence against him, simply because it didn't fit in with his character and the feel of the whole situation. Being the man he was, he couldn't have done it. There are two really first-class ways of clearing a person from suspicion. One is to prove that he wasn't there, and couldn't have been there. The other is to prove that the crime wasn't in his character. Unfortunately, in the present backward state of the world, only the first one is accepted. But the second is very valuable, because it does save one, privately, from following up the wrong scent."

"*Can* you ever be so sure of a person's character—to know they haven't done a thing?"

"I believe so," Ellis replied, looking straight into her eyes.

"Haven't you ever been wrong? Not once?"

"Oh yes. I've been wrong. But only because I didn't really know the person. Didn't know enough about him."

He leaned forward, elbows on knees.

"It's not always easy to know a person through and through, so as to be ready to stake your life that he or she didn't do a thing. In a way, it's harder when it's someone you've known for a long time. One gets to take one's near friends for granted. If you were to ask me, suddenly, if Gilk would do a thing—well, I'd know he wouldn't do *some* things. He couldn't. But others, things that just might conceivably be in his character, if something went wrong, if life pushed him or got him in a corner; I'd have to think a long time to be sure. It's easier if you come in from outside. You've no emotions about it. If Gilk were in trouble, my feelings would be aroused. That makes it hard to be sure. When all the people are strangers, it's far easier."

She was listening with all her attention. Her lip was quivering.

"So, you see," Ellis said very softly, "you needn't blame yourself so much."

Instantly she was on the defensive. Her eyes blazed at him.

"What do you mean?" she began: but he held up his hand, smiling.

"Now, now. I know what's been your trouble. Why not admit it? You've let yourself wonder whether one of your friends may not just possibly have done this thing: and then you've been blaming yourself and calling yourself every sort of a skunk for having such a terrible thought of them."

She hung her head, and did not look at him.

"Well. Cheer up. You couldn't help wondering. How could you?"

"Why have you started all this again?" she said passionately. "I'd managed to forget it for a bit. Now you've brought it all back."

"Stop blaming yourself. Cheer up."

"Don't be such an idiot," she cried. "Do you—— How can I cheer up? Someone——"

She broke off, and turned her face away from him, biting her lip.

"Someone must have done it. I know. Well: your mother's got an alibi. Even if she hadn't, why should she wait till now, when she could have done it at any time of the day or night since he was ill? You might—I say you *might*—have worried about her if it had happened in the middle of the night, when she was alone with him: but not as things are. You don't need to worry about what you were doing, because you know. If anyone's got to worry about that, the police have. Anyway, *you* haven't. The American—whether he did it or not, you're not going to lose any sleep over him. If it was a tradesman, or a stranger, you aren't worried about *him*. There are only two people for you to be worried about, and you're cursing yourself sick for having a doubt about either of them. Well—cheer up. I don't believe that either of them did it."

She looked at him, silent, breathing fast.

"I don't," he repeated. "Cross my heart. Cut my throat. It's not in their characters."

She let out a deep, slow breath, and leaned back once more.

"I won't pretend that either of them might not conceivably take a life, in certain circumstances," Ellis said. "I believe she could: and I believe that he could. But only under intense provocation, and in circumstances very, very different from these. So, you see, you're not so much to blame for thinking that, perhaps——"

She was looking oddly at him. He persevered.

"When people talk a lot, and say it'd be a mercy if something was done, it's hard not to remember it later on. You had a worse fear, too. One you haven't said anything about. If either of them had done it, he or she might be found out."

She stared.

"Of course. What else would I worry about?"

"Blaming yourself for thinking either of them capable of killing a helpless old man."

Her lips twisted scornfully.

"*That* wouldn't worry me."

Ellis was disconcerted. His mouth fell open foolishly, and he blinked.

"Surely," he said, "you wouldn't like to think——"

"Don't be sentimental. Calling father helpless. He trampled on mother for twenty-five years, and me too, ever since I was tiny. Helpless! he was a powerful, cruel old devil. I'd have killed him gladly, a hundred times, if I'd had the guts. Oh, don't look shocked! You'd have felt the same, if you'd been me, and seen how he treated mother. Everyone knows it's true."

"Well," said Ellis dryly—he had recovered himself—"it seems I've been wasting my pity on you."

To his amazement, she put out a hand and caught his arm.

"Don't think me horrid. No, no, don't. You're not to. Oh, it isn't fair!" She burst into tears. "If I'd had a decent life like any other girl, you wouldn't have. I'm not hard a bit, really, to other people. Truly I'm not. It's father made me like it, father, father, father! Everything that's wrong with me is father. Oh—it isn't fair!"

"My dear," Ellis said. He took her hand, but she snatched it away, and held a handkerchief to her mouth. "I made a fool of myself a minute ago, but I'm not a total fool. I know you're not hard. I know what you've been through. I know all about it. That's why I sympathise with you, that's why I'm your friend, that's why I want to clear this whole damned business up, so that you can go to Oxford and put it all behind you for good."

She kept the handkerchief to her mouth. Her face was turned away. A sob shook her thin shoulders.

"I hate myself," she said. "I wish I was dead."

"That wouldn't help," said Ellis cheerfully. "Not in such a hurry to follow your father, are you? Very well, then. Stop alive, and cheer up. And let's talk about someone else, for a change."

"Yes, do let's."

She dried her eyes, and put the handkerchief away.

"Tell me about this tutor of yours," Ellis suggested.

"David?"

"Yes. What's his history? How did he come to be tied up with that poor soul?"

"He's terribly fond of her," she said quickly.

"He'd need to be. Was she always ill? Or did she get ill after they were married?"

"She was always delicate, I believe," the girl said, frowning.

"But she usen't to be as bad as she is now. I don't know. David's very kind—and very sensitive. You see, his mother was ill for years before she died, when David was quite young, and he used to nurse her quite a lot. He felt it most terribly, when she died."

Ellis nodded.

"So much, that he had to find another person to nurse?"

She looked at him, startled.

"I never thought of that. Yes. I suppose so." Her eyes were wide as she considered this. "Anyway," she went on, after a moment, "he was most terribly upset when she did die. Although he'd known, for ages, really, that she must. And that it was the best thing for her. Yet, when it happened, he nearly went mad."

"I know. Much the same sort of thing happened to me. One knows, in one's mind, what's the best; but when the thing happens, one finds there's a whole lot, deep down, that one didn't know anything about."

"Yes." She was looking away past Ellis. "You know, it did him good, as well as being—well——"

"Bad for him?"

She frowned, not liking to hear it put so bluntly.

"I was going to say, as well as upsetting him so terribly. It's made him most wonderfully kind. When I've been stupid about my work, and sulky and horrid, he was never cross, never even for one second. He understood me better than I understood myself."

"Dangerous." Ellis smiled at her. "People who do that aren't always so good for one."

"You mean because one comes to rely on them too much?"

"One day they tell one something one knows isn't true, and then it's terribly hard, because they've always been right before. Mind you"—he smiled again—"it's not hard, every now and then, to understand you better than you understand yourself."

She looked at him challengingly, but with a half-smile.

"Meaning, I suppose, that you do?"

"M'm. Example? You said just now that you hated yourself."

"So I do."

"So do we all, for that matter, unless we're clods. Or unconscious hypocrites. But you hate yourself exaggeratedly. It's proper—how old are you? Eighteen? It's proper to your age. You'll never hate yourself so much again, or feel that life's so grim. But—what I was going to say is—you don't know yourself. You give yourself a worse character than you've got."

"You say so."

"I'll prove it. You told me you'd have nothing but praise for anyone that killed your father. Right. Now—be honest. Look into yourself: take a deep breath: put your hand on your heart, and tell me if you'd really feel quite the same to Eunice or to David if you knew they had crept treacherously into a house to which they had right of entry, tiptoed up to the chair of an old helpless man, and pulled his muffler tight around his neck."

"Can you see David doing it?" he pressed her. "David, who is kind, who has spent most of his life nursing the sick?"

"I never said I could see him doing it!" she cried. "He wouldn't! he couldn't!"

"Aha! and why? Why should you be so quick to say that, if it were a good thing to do? And, if it weren't a good thing—if he wouldn't, he couldn't—how could you feel the same to him, supposing he had done it?"

"That's a trap," she said at last. "It isn't fair."

"Because it makes you admit you would feel differently?"

"Because it takes a thing I said to you, and uses it as if I felt it about myself."

"Then you shouldn't say things you don't mean."

"Heads you win, tails I lose. Are you always right? I'm sorry for your wife."

"That's what auntie said. However: she can take very good care of herself, bless her."

"Who, auntie?"

"Both of 'em. But I meant my wife."

She was looking past him again.

"Was that how father was killed? With his muffler?"

"Looks like it."

"How can you tell? How d'you know it wasn't an accident?"

He told her about the position of the chair, and the medical evidence.

"I don't see how you can be sure," she persisted. "You can't *prove* it."

"No."

"Will they have to decide at the inquest?"

"They will."

"You're not to go badgering mother," she flung at him. "Trying to trip her up, and worrying her. She isn't fit for it. Dr. Carter will tell you so."

"Why should I want to trip her up?" Ellis asked.

"You want to make out that *someone* did it."

"As I told you, your mother has an alibi. She can bring witnesses to say she wasn't there."

"Will I be asked a lot of horrid questions?"

"You'll be asked what you were doing, and presumably you'll give the same answers you gave before."

"It's hateful. I don't see why we should be stood up there, for everyone to stare at."

"I assure you, there's no court in the country where you'd have so much in your favour."

"How do you mean?"

"My dear girl, every man, woman and child in the village is on your side, yours and your mother's. One hundred per cent. If you'd been seen pulling both ends of the muffer, they'd find that you were tying it for him, or pulling him out of the draught. No: you're all right. Don't go sulky, that's all. Just stand up straight, and answer what they ask you. Don't do your fury act, either."

"What d'you mean?"

"Don't tell the coroner you think it's a good thing Matt's no more."

"I'm not going to be a hypocrite, for anyone. If he asks me what I think, I shall tell him."

"Well, if you take my advice, you won't volunteer it."

"I thought I had to swear to tell the truth."

"In reply to questions, yes. He won't ask you that one. Don't bristle at me, girl. The court will want to make everything easy for you. Don't hinder them out of pure cussedness. The only effect it would have would be to make them think you knew more than you should, and were trying to shield someone else."

"Who?"

"David. Eunice. Anyone. Don't take my advice: take auntie's. She's as wise as a vanload of chimpanzees."

Joan smiled in spite of herself. "Are chimpanzees wise?" "They look it. She'll give you good advice, anyway. This inquest is going to be all right for you, if you let it alone. Nobody but you can make it go wrong."

"Don't frighten me." Her eyes were wide again. "It's beastly of you."

"I'll do more than frighten you in a minute. I'll smack you, damned hard."

"You dare!"

"Talk sense, then. All I tell you is, if you have the wit to keep quiet and answer the questions they will ask you, and not go blurting out a whole lot they won't, you'll be all right."

"How do you know they won't ask me?"

"'Cos they won't want to know. All they care about is to make out it was an accident and save the fair name of West Nattering."

"Why shouldn't they?"

"From their point of view, it's most natural."

"Well then. Why must you try to upset it?"

"Because, my dear," said Ellis, "murder's murder. It's a dirty business, whoever the victim was, and as long as we think there's been a murder, it's our duty to say so, and find out who did it."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"CRIPES," Ellis mumbled, as he methodically chewed an excellent piece of roast beef. "What an agonising thing it is to be young."

Gilkison looked up enquiringly.

"That poor child. You should have seen her, Gilk. I just longed to take her and hug her, and say 'there, there' to her."

"She'd have been mightily offended if you had."

"Then and there, yes. At another place and time, no. Poor pet! She was all raw, all nerves, trusting me one minute, spitting at me the next. If she had to face an ordinary jury, I'd be scared for her. She's quite capable of doing a fury at them, or else sulking and refusing to answer."

"What will happen, if she does?"

"Here? They'll just say how overwrought she is, and shoo her out of the box as quick as they can."

"You seem to have a poor opinion of the local sense of justice."

"Not a bit. They don't see it the same way, that's all. They take a local, pragmatic view."

"What'll you do if they find it was an accident?"

"Nothing. Just plug along, quietly."

"Doesn't a verdict like that close the case?"

"Unless further evidence come to light. If we choose to accept it, we can regard the case as closed."

"Bradstreet will want to."

"He'll want to, all right. But he's a conscientious chap, is the Bradder. I don't know——" Ellis frowned.

"What?"

"Nothing. We'll see what we'll see."

"You haven't told me yet what you went to church for," Gilkison said, after a pause.

"My dear Gilk. What does anyone go to church for?"

"I don't know."

"You're a bloody ignorant heathen, that's what you are."

"I asked, what did *you* go for?"

"To worship. And I felt much the better of it."

"You know, Ellis, at times I find you positively nauseating. How you can have the hypocrisy to pretend you went to that place for anything but your own purposes——?"

"It's not a matter which I am prepared to discuss with you. As I say, you're ignorant, and a heathen. What are you doing this afternoon?"

"Going on with my job. What about you?"

"I shall take a nice deck chair out into the garden. I shall read for a short while, and then I shall sleep."

"You needn't look so fatly smug about it."

"I don't know how to look thinly smug."

The waitress came up to Ellis.

"If you please, sir, you're wanted on the telephone."

Ellis wiped his mouth, and went off, still clutching the napkin.

"Yes? Oh—hallo, Bradder. Any news?"

"Nelder's in Devonport."

"Good. When do we go to see him?"

"I thought we might go along to-morrow, after the inquest. The trains run convenient. We could be back by dinner time."

"*After* the inquest?"

"We can't go before."

"You don't regard him as a material witness, then?"

"We have no evidence that would directly connect him with the business, have we?"

Ellis made a curious face at the wall.

"What are we having this inquest for, Bradder?"

There was a short pause at the other end: then, "It's the procedure laid down by law," Bradstreet replied.

"I know, duck: but why?"

"To ascertain the cause of death," the voice said, rather woodenly.

"Will it?" Ellis asked, and hung up before Bradstreet could answer.

He was whistling between his teeth when he came back to the table.

"Shall I have coffee?" he asked. "Or will it keep me awake? I'll risk it. Yes, please, Gladys. That was the Bradder to say that Nelder's been run to earth in Devanport. He proposes we should go and see him to-morrow, *after* the inquest."

"I shall be much interested to hear what he was doing here."

"Good God. You're as bad as the Bradder. Haven't you *any* sense, man? After the inquest. *AFTER* the inquest. What the hell will there be to see him about *after* the inquest! Except the academic query you have just uttered. Oh, go and catalogue Matt's books. It's all you're fit for."

"I suppose," Gilkison said, getting up, "it gives you some obscure pleasure to be offensive."

"Nothing obscure about my pleasure. Plain for all to see."

Gilkison left him. Ellis finished his coffee, waddled off to get a book, and, talking happily to himself, fetched out a chair and a cushion and took them to the part of the garden he had selected. He set up the chair, put the cushion where he wanted it, and settled himself down with grunts of extravagant pleasure. He read for a while, emitting every now and then a loud yelp of laughter. Then he shut the book, clasped his hands over his stomach, and slept.

He was wakened by Gilkison pulling at his sleeve.

"Ellis. Wake up. It's most important."

Ellis blinked, looked at the sun, then, quickly, at his watch.

"So it is! You're right. Lord—teatime, and I might have missed it." He jumped up. "Shall we have it here, or inside?"

"Listen. The books—some of them are missing."

Ellis stood still.

"Some of the first editions have gone," Gilkison went on breathlessly, "and seconds or inferior copies have been substituted. *Of Human Bondage, Death and Splendour, Lakewater*—the one with the cancelled advertisement—is gone, and an

ordinary first put in its place. *Far From the Madding Crowd*——”

“It doesn’t matter which ones,” Ellis said. He stood, staring at the hedge. “Damn you, Gilk. I’ve been waiting for this, or something like it.”

“You mean to say you expected it?”

“I was afraid. Many gone?”

“I was beginning to tell you, when you stopped me.” Gilkison took out his notebook. “I’ve found nine, so far. Very likely there will be more.”

“Where were they? In the front room?”

“Yes.”

“All in the same shelf?”

“No.”

“Any idea where the substitutes came from? Never mind. We can go into that later.”

“From the same shelves. The books are in double rows: the inferior copies were at the back. When Matt had duplicates, he often did that.”

• “Often? Not always?”

“I can’t say. I don’t know enough. After all, I have had very little opportunity to examine the library as a whole.”

“All right, don’t get narked. No one’s impugning your professional skill. Damn! damn! damn!”

“What’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter? When you come running here to tell me that?”

“I can’t see why you seem so put out about it personally.”

“My good Gilk—don’t you see what it means? We know now why Matt had to be killed on Friday. Before you and he could find out the loss.”

Gilkison opened his eyes and uttered a prim, almost soundless whistle.

“Yes,” Ellis said. “The one strong point in the Baildons’ favour is gone. You see now why I asked you where the substitute books came from.”

“I don’t.”

“If they were in the same room, anyone who’d been in there might know about them. If they came from somewhere else——”

“Ellis.” Gilkison stopped dead, a look of real distress on his face.

“Yes. Go on. Tell me.”

“The second edition of one book—*Lakewater*. That didn’t come from the front room.”

"Sure?"

"I noticed it particularly, the last time I was here. It has a bookplate on the flyleaf—Coppin: Charles Coppin. I remember noticing the design."

"What room did it come from?"

"It was in the room where I was sleeping. I had time to examine the books there."

"Whose room?"

"Joan Baildon's."

Ellis sighed.

"Come on," he said. "Let's have tea. Then I'll get on to the Bradder, and tell him his inquest's off."

"Inquest off? But I thought you implied——"

"Nelder."

"Nelder? You don't think he took the books."

"Oh, Gilk, Gilk! Who wrote to Nelder, if Matt didn't? Who needed the money Matt wouldn't hand out? Who was in for the worst sort of trouble, as soon as Matt discovered that the books were gone? Nelder's evidence is vital. Even the locals can't suggest holding the inquest until we've got what he has to say."

"Ellis. This is appalling."

"Just found that out, have you?"

"Do you really mean that those two——?"

"Don't put it on to me. I don't mean anything. I go by the facts, like the poor bloody policeman I am. It must have struck you what brought Nelder here."

"I didn't think of it. I must say, Ellis, I think you are going ahead rather faster than the facts warrant. What proof have you Matt didn't get rid of the books and make the substitution himself? May he not have written to Nelder? He sold books before."

"Gilkie! Gilkie! You're as bad as the Bradder. Worse, in fact, for you haven't the same excuse. You're going right back on yourself. To start with, you were incredulous that Matt could have had dealings with anyone but you. Now, like the sentimentalist you are, you switch right across, and argue against your own professional status."

"You dare to call me a sentimentalist! After saying you were afraid I'd find something like this, and damning me for finding it. No, but seriously, Ellis, I don't see how you can prove that Matt wasn't responsible."

"That's why Nelder's evidence is vital, and the inquest must be adjourned till we can get it. Now—tea. Tea. And lots of it."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ALL THINGS considered, Bradstreet took Ellis's news well. Ellis did not trust this time to the telephone, but went to deliver his news in person.

"Yes," Bradstreet said. "I was afraid something like that might come out. Though, mind you," he added cautiously, "I think we can exaggerate the importance of it. Even if those two poor souls did take a book or two, it doesn't follow that they killed him."

"I know it doesn't, Bradder. I know it doesn't. What's more, I know it's just the kind of pitfall we as a tribe are very apt to fall into. But I think we're more likely to fall into it when we're looking for evidence against someone. Not when we're doing our level best not to find it."

"That might work just the same way," Bradstreet argued. "I mean, just because we didn't want anything of the kind to come up, we may exaggerate its importance when it does, or even mistake its meaning altogether. Besides, we don't know who took the books. Yet we're talking as if it was proved that those two did it. That's what I mean: we're prejudiced."

Ellis gazed at him reverently.

"Bradder, you're a marvel. For sheer casuistry, I never heard the like."

"What's that?" Bradstreet asked.

"Casuistry? Twiddling the facts."

"Come now, I'm not twiddling no facts." He had slipped into dialect again: "I'm only saying we don't know yet how to read 'em. Valuable books have been taken, and other books, less valuable, put in their place. That's all we know for certain."

"True for you. And the fact that this supplies a motive for the bumping off of Matt on the day he was bumped off, and that one of the books came from the bedroom of one of the suspects—that goes for nothing, does it?"

"It might mean a lot, and it might mean nothing at all."

Ellis grinned at him.

"It does my heart good to hear you. When Gilk told me what he'd found, I damned him good and hard."

Bradstreet picked up the telephone.

"Well, I must get on to the coroner, and put off this here inquest. Better put it off for—how long? Shall we say Thursday? That allows for anything else turning up."

"You country blokes do things very much your own way, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Either you have the inquest five minutes after the corpse is found, or—what will you do with Matt? Embalm him?"

"I don't reckon we shall need to do that," Bradstreet replied, in matter-of-fact tones. "Say we see this Nelder chap to-morrow. We shan't be back till evening time. That takes us to Tuesday. There may be something in his evidence that we'll have to follow up. Then that friend of yours, Mr. What's-his-name——"

"Gilkison."

"That's his right name, is it. I get a bit muddled, what with you calling him different things. He may find out something else, while he's working on the books, same as he found this out. I reckon Thursday will be about right."

"I bow to you, Bradder." Ellis blew out a huge sigh. "I'm rotten at the legal minutiae of a case. Always have been. I've been spoilt, that's what it is. Had it all done for me. Been left to do my own stuff in my own way. I need a nanny."

Bradstreet spoke into the receiver.

"Nattering 104, please."

"You're a perfect nanny, Bradder."

Bradstreet smiled indulgently.

"No chance of luring you up to town, I suppose?" Ellis went on.

"I don't reckon I should be any use up in those parts. Thank you, all the—— Hallo. Is that Mr. Dobell's house? Yes, please. Inspector Bradstreet. I'm a countryman born and bred. I should be all thumbs, up in London."

"No you wouldn't. You'd be grand. Well—we'll talk of that later. So long."

He left the station, and stood for a moment in the road, wondering whether to look in once more at the Baildons'—there was always the pretext of going to see how Gilkison was getting on—or to call on Miss Attwill, or to go back to the hotel. He decided on the last, and had gone fifty yards in that direction, when he stopped again. An instinct, which he could not explain, urged him to go to the Baildon's. He felt obscurely that, if he didn't, something might go wrong.

"Ellis, you're getting jumpy, my lad. It won't do."

All the same, he obeyed the prompting, and took the now familiar road: so familiar that it was only by an effort that he remembered how, forty-eight hours ago, he had not known that it existed.

The feeling which made him go to the house was never fully explained, but there was something going on in the Baidon's front room, and that was an acute conflict in the mind of Paul Gilkison.

Gilkison, when he got back after tea to continue his work, ran into Joan in the garden. She smiled at him, and showed a tendency to engage him in conversation. They exchanged a few obvious remarks about the weather, and came to a full stop. Both stood silent, both smiled, and Gilkison, excusing himself, went indoors and resumed his cataloguing.

Presently he became aware that she was in the passage outside the room. She was hesitating, trying to pluck up her courage to come in. To his keen annoyance, Gilkison felt his face burning, and his heart beating faster, and knew that he was listening with preternatural attention for her to move. He heard no sound, yet he was aware, through what sense he could not say, first, that she was in the door, next that she was in the laneway between the projecting bookcase and the wall: and then she came out into the open space.

He looked up and smiled. Her manner was so awkward that he felt calm and experienced by comparison.

"Did you want anything?" he asked her.

"I wondered if perhaps I could help. I know where most of the books are. I often used to have to get them when father wanted them."

In a flash he thought, she wants to cover up the substitutions. Yet—how can she? Well, what *does* she want?

"That's very kind of you," he said. "If I get into any difficulty, I'll come and ask you."

Fool! now he'd dismissed her, which wasn't at all what he wanted to do. He smiled again, and, to detain her, said something which appalled him the moment it was out of his mouth.

"Oh, look, Miss Baidon. There *is* one thing. Do you know where your father kept his first edition of *Lakewater*? You know—the one with the advertisement that was cancelled?"

Good Lord, he thought, now I've done it. I've interfered. I've spoilt everything. Ellis will be furious with me. So great was his consternation at what he had done, that he did not see the expression on Joan's face. His ears singing with horror, he heard her voice after what seemed ages, and from far away.

"*Lakewater*? Yes, he kept it here."

She went to one of the shelves, and pulled out a book. Mechanically, Gilkison stretched out a hand for it. He dared

to look at her, and saw that she was standing still, staring with projecting eyes at the book in her hand.

Before she could speak, there was a quick shuffling sound, the tenor clearing of a throat, and Ellis appeared in the doorway.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo. A helping hand?"

Gilkison lifted to him a face blurred with guilt.

"Miss Baildon was very kindly finding a book for me."

Ellis paid no attention. He was looking at Joan. Her face was white and blank.

"But," she stammered, "this isn't the right one."

Ellis stepped forward, took it from her, and opened the book.

"Second impression," he read. "Not what you expected, Gilk?"

"I—I understood Mr. Baildon had one of the first edition with the cancelled advertisement."

"Yes, but," Joan said, "this isn't the other one. I mean, there's a first edition besides the one with the advertisement. This one isn't——"

She broke off, staring from one to the other in dismay. Ellis sat down on a table.

"Let's get this right," he said, in practical tones. "Gilk—you're looking for a particular copy of this book?"

"Yes. Yes. The exceedingly rare first with the cancelled advertisement."

"Right. You couldn't find it, and you've asked Miss Baildon to find it for you?"

"Yes. Miss Baildon came in, just before you did, and very kindly asked if there was anything she could do to help."

Ellis smiled at Joan.

"Then you, Miss Baildon, went to the place where you expected to find the book, and found this copy in its place?"

"Yes." She spoke as if she were in a trance.

"That's a surprise to you?"

"Yes."

"You say there's a third copy?"

"Yes. An ordinary first edition."

"Where was it? In here?"

She shook her head.

"In the little room upstairs. In the front. Above this one."

"I understand from Gilk here that your father kept his duplicate copies in the same shelf, behind the first copies."

"Some he did. Not all. Not this one."

"Why did he keep some here, and not others?"

"I don't know. There wasn't any sense in a lot he did," she added, with something like her old spirit.

"Was this copy,"—he held it up—"in the upstairs front room too?"

She shook her head again, staring at the book. The whites of her eyes, showing huge through the lenses, gave her a ghastly appearance.

"Where was it?"

Her lips worked to frame the words before they sounded.

"In my room."

Ellis nodded, as if he found that perfectly natural.

"Had it always been kept there, or only lately?"

"I don't know about always. Ever since I remember. Ever since I noticed it."

"Your father didn't at any time ask you to bring it down here?"

She shook her head again. The colour was coming back to her face: she moistened her lips.

"Oh well," Ellis said easily, "I dare say we'll find out, in time. I expect there was a lot your father did that you wouldn't know about."

She caught at this eagerly.

"Oh yes. He was terribly secretive. Once, when I came back from school early, and went upstairs, I found him in my room, making some changes. At least, I suppose he was. He had a lot of books out on the bed. He screamed at me to go away."

Ellis nodded again. "I don't expect you've any idea, then, where he would have put the copy we are looking for? The one with the cancelled advertisement?"

The room was tense again, Gilkison dared not look at her: he felt his heart driving the blood into his ears.

After a long pause, she shook her head.

"Perhaps he may have put it in your room, in the place of this copy? Do you mind if we look?"

Without waiting for her answer, he got up, and motioned for her to go ahead. Gilkison sucked in his thin cheeks, blew them out again, stood up, and stretched himself. He had seldom spent a more uneasy five minutes; and he still dreaded what Ellis might say to him when they were alone.

He heard the footsteps overhead; Joan's room evidently reached half way, the rest of the space above the sitting room being taken by the little room she spoke of. He heard the sliding of the glass shelf, and the note of Ellis's voice. After a brief interval, the footsteps came down again.

"No luck," exclaimed Ellis cheerfully, as he ushered the girl in.

"What was in its place?" Gilkison asked.

"Nothing. Just a gap. You can't see it, till you move the first row. This was in the back row. You'd better have a good look, Gilk, and see if there are any others missing."

"Yes, I had, hadn't I?"

"Are the books insured?" Ellis asked Joan.

"I don't know."

"We must ask your mother."

"She wouldn't know," Joan said quickly. "She knows even less about them than I do. He used to tell me to get a book, when he wanted it. He wouldn't trust her."

"Why wouldn't he trust her?"

"She didn't know about the books. She didn't like them."

"I can understand that," Ellis said grimly. "She must like 'em now, however. They're her inheritance—hers and yours. And, if anyone's been robbing you, we must nab him."

"No one would rob us."

"No one here would—now. They might have robbed your father, though. Anything that was taken before Friday afternoon would have been taken from him, not from you. You don't remember, I suppose, when you last saw this book, in its place in your room?"

"No. I don't."

"It wasn't recently, anyway. If you'd noticed it in the last few days, you would remember, most probably, wouldn't you?"

"I certainly haven't seen it recently."

"Right. That's all we can do. How much longer will you be, Gilk?"

"I'd only just come——"

"Glutton for work, isn't he?" Ellis said to Joan. "I think I'll use my authority and take him away. A little fresh air, Gilk, fresh air and exercise, to put colour into those pale cheeks of yours."

"I thought you wanted me to look and see if there were any more books missing."

"You'll have all to-morrow to do that. The morning as well, now that the inquest is postponed."

Joan drew a quick breath.

"The inquest——?"

"Yes. Haven't they told you? I'm so sorry. It is wretched for you, having it dangling like this."

"Why have they postponed it?"

"Had to. We've found some more evidence. Come on, Gilk. What a time the man takes."

"What new evidence have you found?"

He jerked his head round, and looked full at her.

"I can't tell you what it's worth yet. Inspector Bradstreet and I have to go off to-morrow to interview a man in Devonport. I may be able to tell you more about it when I get back."

"Do you think the man—killed father?"

"Most unlikely. But he may be able to give us a line on whoever did. That's all I can tell you, now, and I oughtn't to have told you that much: so you mustn't ask me any more questions."

He took her arm and gave it a friendly shake.

"Good-bye now, and don't worry."

"Will you come and tell me if you find out anything to-morrow?"

"All depends what it is. It might be something I'd have to keep secret, and not even tell Gilk. Wretched chaps, we policemen. We're tied hand and foot. Now, now, what are you looking so miserable about? I'll tell you if I can—but I can't promise. Cheer up."

She watched them go, standing in the doorway, a tall slim figure with great mournful eyes.

Ellis stumped down the road, his bulging cheeks bright crimson. For the first hundred yards he said nothing. Gilkison dared not speak, for fear of an explosion. Then Ellis saw a tin lying by the side of the road. He took a running kick at it, and sent it in leaping, clamorous career along the tarmac till it bounced into the silence of the ditch.

"Hell!" he said. "What a job. What a bloody, bloody job. I get that poor kid a bit better, and then I have to go and make her worse than ever. She won't sleep all night, now."

He turned to Gilkison.

"I couldn't help it," he almost shouted. "I had to. It's a foul split to have in one. No wonder people are afraid of us."

"Ellis."

"Eh?"

"She didn't know that book was gone. She was knocked out with surprise. No one could act as well as that."

"You mean, she was surprised the second edition was there. The one out of her room."

"Yes."

"I believe she was. But it doesn't at all follow she didn't

know the original copy was gone—the one with the cancelled advertisement.” He swung round on Gilkison. “How did the subject crop up? Did you find her in there fiddling around, or what?”

Gilkison struggled with temptation, and overcame it. He confessed what had happened.

“I never meant to ask the question,” he finished. “It just came out.”

“I know. They do. I never consciously meant to put the wind up the child as I did. The policeman took charge.” He looked at Gilkison. “I had the feeling, after I left the Bradder, that something was going on here. I’d actually started for the pub, and I turned back. Good job I did.”

Gilkison, whose heart had been filled with relief and gratitude towards Ellis for not abusing him, now felt a perverse resentment. Ellis’s assumption that he would have done harm nettled him. To his dismay, he found himself hunting in his mind for some mistake of Ellis’s with which he could retort upon him. He thought of something, but did not at once utter it. Ellis seemed to have recovered his spirits. He was humming, snapping his fingers, and looking about him.

“Oh well,” he said suddenly, “it won’t be for much longer, I hope.”

His face cleared. To Gilkison’s jaundiced eye, it looked complacent. Gilkison took a deep breath, and launched his barb.

“One theory of yours you have had to scrap, I gather.”

“Meaning?”

“If you remember, from some slip of the tongue of Miss Caunter, you inferred that she was in love with Rattray.”

Ellis opened his eyes wide.

“Did I? Oh yes. She nearly called him David. Yes.”

“Well,” persisted Gilkison, “that hardly fits in with the violent jealousy you say she feels towards him, does it?”

“I don’t see why not. It might fit in very well. She used to be sweet on him. Then she gets jealous over Joan.”

“You’ve just made that up at this minute,” Gilkison exclaimed in disgust. “You’re just imagining. That’s all.”

“So are you. Tell me what possible value your remark had towards elucidating the case, and I’ll give it serious consideration.”

He went on humming, quite unruffled. Gilkison tried again.

“Why did you drag me away? There’s a good hour and a half till dinner.”

“We’d given her enough to chew on. I don’t want to leave

you any longer with her. You're too kind-hearted, Gilk. She'd have started pumping you." He gripped Gilkison's elbow. "I hate this business just as much as you do, but, for the moment, we've got to leave her guessing."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE TELEPHONE rang again before they had finished dinner, and Bradstreet informed Ellis that the coroner had made no difficulty about postponing the inquest till the Thursday. As no witnesses had to be brought from a distance, with the exception of Mr. Stuyvesant and, possibly, Nelder, a minimum of inconvenience would be caused.

"Ring Stuyvesant, will you?" he asked Bradstreet. "I think he's happier with you than me. He thinks I'm mad, for some reason."

A sound like a discreet chuckle came down the wire.

"Very good. I'll tell him."

"Bless you. Sweet sleep."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, Sweet sleep. Peepy-bye."

"Thank you. The same to you."

Ellis came back, grinning.

"When we have had our coffee and tarried awhile in carminative discourse, I shall leave you. I have an errand."

"I can see you want me to ask you what it is."

"And if I did not, your curiosity would compel you. Well, you shall know. There are no secrets between us; very few, anyway; and this shall not be one. I am going to call on friend Rattray just after nine, i.e., at the hour when he should be home from his do."

"He won't be there."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"But he'll spot it, Ellis. He told you he didn't get back till ten."

"He didn't. She did."

"Well then——"

"I'll say they told me in the pub he was free at nine. That'll give him a little explaining to do. I don't see why we should do all the work."

As soon as they had finished, Ellis took his book into the garden, and read till five to nine. Then he got up, and went off down the road to Rattray's house.

On second thoughts, he did not go in at once. A long *tête à tête* with Ursula Rattray did not appeal to him. Accordingly he went down to the bridge, and spent a few minutes watching the trout which had had such a calming effect upon the emotions of Mr. Stuyvesant. He was not alone, and soon found himself an object of greater interest to the villagers than the trout, which, he supposed, they had likewise come to look at. What on earth did they imagine he was doing? The idea that the trout might be the object of his professional attention so amused Ellis that he gave a sudden shout of laughter, startling the onlookers, who, after the first stare of astonishment, looked away as if he had committed an indecency.

Still chuckling, Ellis walked on, making a circuit of the village and timing himself to arrive at Rattray's just after half past nine. He entered the gate with an air of immense purpose.

There was no sign of Mrs. Rattray in the verandah. Her chair had been put away.

Ellis beat a tattoo on the door with his knuckles. A shrill yapping broke out somewhere inside the house, and was hushed by the closing of a door. Then, after an interval of silence, soft footsteps advanced timidly to the door. It opened, and a scared-looking girl of about thirteen stared up into his face.

"Good-evening," Ellis cried, in loud tones. "May I see Mr. Rattray, please?"

"He isn't in," the girl whispered timidly. "He's out."

"Out? I understood in the village that he would be here soon after nine."

She shook her head.

"He isn't in," she repeated.

"Well then," Ellis said, "perhaps I can come in and wait for him. Is Mrs. Rattray in? Maybe she'll see me. If not, I'll wait in his study." He stepped into the hall. "Ask Mrs. Rattray, will you, please?"

She closed the door, stared at him doubtfully, whispering something he could not hear, and started off on her errand.

"Who shall I say it is, please?"

"Mr. Ellis McKay."

"Mr. Ellis McKay," she repeated dutifully, and, still staring, backed out of the hall.

Ellis waited. The atmosphere of the house closed in around him. A clock in the corner ticked heavily, slowly. What went on here? What form of life, what secrets, what hopes, what

agonies and fears? A stuffy tension, a taut respectability: or was he imagining it? Would not any such gimcrack hallway breathe forth the same on a hot June evening?

"Will you come this way, please, sir?"

She led Ellis down a short passage and into a room at right angles to the hall. The shaded light revealed Ursula Rattray lying on a sofa, with the air of exhaustion shown by cross-channel passengers who have just been sick, and expect soon to be sick again.

"How do you do, Mr. McKay." She hung a limp hand at him. "How nice of you to call."

"How nice of you to receive me." He sat down, his thick legs apart, and beamed at her. "I just dropped in to see your husband for a moment. I expect he won't be long."

"Ten." Her eyes wandered to the clock. "He is always in by ten."

"Can you put up with me till then? I won't be keeping you up, or anything?"

"Oh no. I never go to bed till David's back. He always carries me to my room." She gave a hideous, coquettish smile. "It's a little ceremony we've kept ever since our honeymoon."

Ellis repressed the shiver that ran up his spine.

"Very nice and romantic," he said heartily. "A pity more people don't keep up those things. I'm all for the little ceremonies of life, myself. The ritual."

"The ritual," she echoed him, her large eyes staring into his. "That's just it. You like it. You understand. So many men don't. They don't realise what these little things mean to a woman."

"No, indeed. They study a woman at first, and then they take her for granted."

She did not react to this. Ellis soon saw that she followed an unbroken train of thought, and took no notice of any remark that led away from it.

"The little things of life mean so much. To any woman. But particularly to a woman like me."

Ellis inclined his head, gravely sympathetic.

"We sick women need them so much more than other women. We need them continually. If David were the ordinary uncomprehending sort of man, I—I couldn't live."

"You are lucky, Mrs. Rattray, to have such a devoted husband."

"Yes, yes, I am, indeed. I know."

The faint gleam left her face, as she wondered whether she

might not be putting herself in too happy a light. Guessing her thought, Ellis hastened to put matters right.

"You need that, Mrs. Rattray. Life owes you so much. You have enough to bear as it is. A devoted husband is the least that can be granted to you. We must have *some* justice, even in this world."

She gazed at him.

"How well you understand! Your wife must be a very happy woman."

"Oh, I'm not at all a good husband. Understanding is one thing. Performance is another."

She gave her horrible little sickly smile.

"Now you're abusing yourself. I won't believe you."

"You're too kind. Your own life makes you too indulgent to other people's faults."

Then he felt ashamed of himself, for she shook her head.

"Oh no. I don't think that's true. I'm often horribly cross and fault-finding."

"That's your health," he assured her.

"It is, partly. But I musn't put all the blame on that. Some of it is just me, being horrid."

He looked at her more kindly, seeing in her a pathetic struggle towards honesty and self-knowledge. The horror of her appearance, the emaciated, paint-encrusted face, the gash of a mouth, the claw-like hands, blurred into the softer outline of a victim trying still to present an appearance to the world.

"It's so hard to tell," he said, looking away over her head. "I had a bad illness once, and took months to get over it. Not till I was over it, and quite recovered, did I realise that my mind had been affected with my body. I didn't go dotty, or anything like that. But just as I had a sick body, I had a sick mind, and I thought sick thoughts. But, at the time, I didn't realise it. I thought I was thinking straight."

She screwed her mouth up into a wrinkled crimson ring.

"I don't think I like that thought. It frightens me. Because I'm sick all the time. So I might never think straight."

"I shouldn't worry too much about that. How do any of us know we're thinking straight? I'm always making a fool of myself. I'm never sure."

"You're only saying that to cheer me up."

"Oh no, I'm not. I think something stupid every day of my life, and don't find out till afterwards."

She smiled faintly, and looked at the clock.

"David will be here soon," she said.

"It's a shame he has to be away so much. That's the worst

of a man that does good works. But then, he wouldn't be himself if he didn't, would he?"

"He's out so many evenings now."

"Everybody wants him. He's a most popular man."

"Yes," she agreed listlessly. The opinion in which other people held him did not interest her. Ellis pressed on.

"I heard a wonderful tribute to him, only this morning."

"People do like him."

"This was from poor Joan Baildon."

Her thin body tightened on the instant. Ellis proceeded without a pause. "She said he was the kindest person she had ever met. She couldn't say too much for him. She'd naturally be grateful, after all he had done to help her. But this was more than gratitude. Evidently he has made a very deep impression on her."

Her face lengthened. She was looking at him with an expression he could not read.

"Joan is perfectly loyal," she said, in almost fierce assertion. (She pronounced it "loyle.") "She's one of the most loyal people I've ever met."

"I'm sure she is. She'd never hear a word against anyone she was fond of."

"I don't mean in that way. I mean——"

It was all too plain what she meant. Ellis stifled a feeling of nausea.

"She's only a child," he said. "And a handicapped child at that. I think it is wonderfully kind of your husband to take so much trouble with her."

"David is perfectly sensible, of course. Even if she did get silly, the way young girls do. Some men aren't sensible. No matter how young the girl is. In fact, it often makes them all the sillier. The men, I mean."

"Well—with him so sensible, and her so loyal——" The words stuck in Ellis's mouth: he couldn't go on.

"Yes."

She looked at him earnestly, anxiously. He put his elbows on his knees, and resolutely changed the subject.

"What part of Scotland do you come from, Mrs. Rattray?"

"Scotland?" she said faintly: then she flushed. "How did you know? I haven't a trace of accent."

"No. But you're some sort of a Celt: and there's a tune in your voice, every now and then. It isn't Welsh, it isn't Irish; there's nothing it could be but Highland. I'd say you were a Highlander who had lived in London, or a Londoner who spent a lot of time in the Highlands."

"I'm not Scottish, really. My mother was. I was born in London. We went up a few summers to my granny's place. I never learned to speak her way, though. That's why I can't think how you guessed."

"They were good summers, were they?"

"Lovely." The refined Cockney had come back into her voice. She glanced pettishly at the clock.

"I can't think where David is."

"He'll be back soon. Tell me about your summers in the Highlands."

She glanced at him, unwillingly, and made a small restless movement. He could see that she did not want to surrender.

"He's usually in before this," she said.

"Too bad. Have you been up there since you married?"

"We went for a part of our honeymoon."

"Wasn't it a success?"

"No. It rained, and brought on my rheumatism. David hated it. He wouldn't let me go there since."

"D'you want to?"

"I couldn't stand the journey. And it's so wet up there."

"I never mind the wet," Ellis said. "It's worth it, for the colours afterwards."

"Yes." A memory gleamed in her eyes. "I remember once, when I was only about six or seven, and it had been raining all day, suddenly it turned fine about six, and I thought it was the end of the world, and asked Granny if we were in Heaven."

"I know. The new Jerusalem."

"Yes." The gleam faded. She looked hunted and worried. Before Ellis could speak, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she said, in a moan he realised to be her habitual public protest against her invalidism.

The door opened, and the little girl put her head round.

"Please'm, I got to go home now. Dad said I wasn't to stop a minute after ten."

Mrs. Rattray uttered a whimper of distress and anger. She rolled an eye at the clock, like a frightened horse.

"That's all right," Ellis assured her heartily. "I'll stay here and look after Mrs. Rattray till Mr. Rattray comes back. You go off home."

The girl looked mutely at him, then at her mistress.

"Very well," she whispered. "Goodnight'm."

She went out. There was a silence. Looking at his hostess, Ellis saw with horror that she was smiling again. He caught at her mood before she could speak.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Rattray," he cried, with his best assumption of bluffness. "I'm a good, safe, dependable married man. Anyway, it's your husband's fault. If he stays out working, and leaves you alone, he can't complain if another man takes care of you till he comes back."

Vigorously, without pause, he set himself to dominate and charm her. Before she could resist, he had dragged her back to the Highlands. She shall not look at that clock, he decided. So, while her eyes faltered and ached to turn towards it, he put forth all his power, telling her story after story of the Highlands, using the strength of his voice, every power he had, in the effort to hold her attention and charm or bludgeon her into forgetfulness of the present.

And he succeeded. Her eyes, gazing into his, at first unwillingly, then mournfully, lightened, came alive, then gleamed with pleasure and disturbance. The sickly face became animated, the drooping mouth relaxed, and he saw, in flashes, the girl she must once have been, the girl that took David Rattray's staid but passionate fancy and won his heart. She laughed: her breath came faster: she uttered little exclamations of delight and recognition. For close on a quarter of an hour she forgot the clock. Then a hurried step sounded, the door opened, and David Rattray rushed in.

His wife turned with a small tearful cry in which joy and relief were already smothered in remonstrance. Ellis had time to notice the speed with which, although for a few minutes she had wholly forgotten him, she switched to a note of reproach, before all his attention was claimed by Rattray.

The man appeared distraught. His face was white, his hair dishevelled, his eyes staring, and he breathed as if he had run a mile. He rushed towards his wife, began to gasp out some cry of endearment and contrition, when suddenly he saw Ellis.

The effect on him was extraordinary. He pulled up with the abrupt irrelevance of a figure in a stopped cinematograph film. His already white face set like marble, his eyes went dark and small, and he began to babble and stutter as if he had had a stroke.

Then, sibilant and breathy, the words came.

"You here. You—what are you doing—you—at this hour."

His voice burst through the obstruction and leaped out in an uncontrolled shout.

"What do you mean by coming here when I am away, and badgering my wife with your questions? You coward! how

dare you ! Torturing a poor helpless invalid who can't defend herself, when I am not here to protect her ! ”

For a moment after he stopped the echoes of his voice seemed to blare from the walls. Then Ursula Rattray made a queer little mewling noise of protest.

“ But, David dear, Mr. McKay hasn't been bullying me at all. He's been telling me the most lovely stories about the Highlands.”

The effect of this was to infuriate Rattray still more. He stuttered helplessly, his eyes rolled in his head, and foam appeared at the corners of his mouth.

“ Highlands ! ” he got out at last. “ Highlands ! Damnation ! I won't have anyone talk to you about the Highlands ! ” He pointed to the door. “ Get out ! Get out this instant ! ”

Ellis was on his feet, pugnacious, square, his lower lip thrust out. His voice rang clear in contrast to the other's thickened shout.

“ Pull yourself together, man. Don't talk rubbish. I came here to ask you a question, at a time when I was given to understand you would be at home. When you did not appear, and the child who was here had to go home, I stayed to keep Mrs. Rattray company till you came. If you object to that, you should come home at the proper time.”

A mew came from the sofa.

“ Yes, David darling, pet, truly you should. You've never been so late. Pet rabbit was so frightened. At least, she would have been if nice kind man hadn't stayed and told her lovely stories.”

Rattray looked at her without speaking, then at Ellis. He began to shake all over, turning finally to her with a look of desperate appeal. Then, regardless of Ellis, he plunged blindly forward, and fell on his knees, burying his head in her lap. Groans came from him. She cooed and stroked his hair. Her face was transfigured with tenderness.

“ There, Davie pet. Own rabbit will fordive 'oo, make 'oo well.”

Ellis felt that in a couple of seconds he would be sick. He coughed imperatively.

“ I am going now, Rattray. If you will be so good as to come to the door with me, I will ask you the question I came to ask.”

Slowly, Rattray turned to him a bleared, bewildered face. All the fight had gone out of him. He was like a tired man wakened suddenly from sleep.

"Yes," he said, and lumbered to his feet. "Yes." He turned to his wife. "I won't be a moment, darling."

"Good-night, Mrs. Rattray," Ellis said. "Thank you for entertaining me so well."

She barely raised her eyes: she had forgotten him.

"Yes," she said simply. "Don't be long, Davie."

"I won't. I won't."

Silently he accompanied Ellis to the gate. There, Ellis wheeled round on him, about to snap out his question peremptorily, in the need to break into his mood. Seeing Rattray's face, he checked himself in amazement. The schoolmaster was looking at him composedly. His face was still pale, but he had quite recovered.

"I must ask you to forgive me, Mr. McKay. I—I have been under a considerable strain lately, largely from overwork. I was tired to-night, and on the way back I had a puncture. The delay and the knowledge that Ursula would be waiting for me and be anxious, perhaps terrified, preyed on my mind: and when I came in and unexpectedly found you there, I'm afraid it was your profession I remembered, rather than yourself, and jumped to the conclusion that you had been taking advantage of my absence to question her."

"That's all right," Ellis said. "The question——"

"Our relationship has something more than usually protective about it, owing to her state of health. In that I am abnormally sensitive where she is concerned."

"Quite right. I came to——"

"I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive what must have seemed not only boorish, but ungrateful."

"Think no more about it. I had just one question to ask you, Mr. Rattray: the question that brought me to your house. Perhaps you would prefer me to leave it till later?"

"No, no. I am at your service."

"When you went into the Baidons' house, on Friday afternoon, to return the book you had borrowed, why were you in such a hurry when you came out?"

Rattray did not answer at once. He looked down at the ground, and the colour came back to his face. When he spoke his voice was indistinct, a muttering only.

"You humiliate me, Mr. McKay. I should have thought you had already seen enough of our life to realise——"

He threw up his head.

"My wife, as you have seen, is abnormally sensitive to any absence from her on my part. It is part of her illness. Often—I am telling you this in confidence—often it takes the form of a

morbid suspicion. She fears, poor soul"—his face was contorted—"that her affliction has made her unattractive to me, and therefore she tends to misconstrue any absence from her which is not accounted for to the minute. Knowing that I was about to leave the book at the house, and knowing that, as it was a holiday, Joan would be at home, she—she exacted from me a schedule, a time-table——"

He was looking at the ground again, his face dark.

"I dare say you will think it unmanly of me to submit to such an extent to her whim, to humour her: but I believe it to be my duty, and Dr. Carter, I may say, agrees with me. Even so, I find it a very painful subject to discuss."

Ellis nodded.

"Were you behind your schedule when you left the book?"

"I—I don't—I may have been, by a minute or two. Why do you ask?"

"It would account for your anxiety not to be seen coming out of the gate."

Ellis, carefully flicking at a flower with his finger, felt rather than saw Rattray stiffen and scrutinise him.

"I do not remember any anxiety. If I manifested any, it was probably an unconscious action. A reflex almost. One develops strange protections, under the pressure of a constant vigilance and suspicion." He raised his chin. "Does that satisfy you, Mr. McKay?"

"For the moment. Good-night, Mr. Rattray."

"Good-night. And try not to think too badly of my behaviour."

"That's all right."

Ellis waved his hand, and stumped off in the rich golden dusk. Bats dipped above his head, and the trees, westward, stood out rich and dark against the mellowed splendour. He began to whistle softly, in low, liquid notes that filled the quiet roadway.

A villager called good-night to him from a doorway, and presently another and another. The warm, sing-song voices harmonised perfectly with the light and the air. Ellis sang back an answer, each encounter, each step almost, cleansing from him the marks of the hour he had just spent.

By the time he reached the inn, he was at peace. He exchanged a few words with the porter, looked at the sky, its softness pricked faintly with tiny stars, and then, in distaste at the thought of repeating to Gilkison what had happened, made straight for his room and went to bed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"SOMETHING'S wrong there. Something's very wrong. But I'm damned if I know what it is."

Ellis and Bradstreet were seated in the train, on the way to Devonport. The early mist still clung to the valleys and the banks of the river: there was every promise of the wonderful weather continuing. Ellis faced the open window, and the breeze blew his hair into a ludicrous red crest, to the secret amusement of his colleague.

"The man was in such a state," Ellis went on, "that I can't believe any degree of anxiety or apprehension over his wife could bring on. He was like a shell-shock case, or a man just after a murder."

"Perhaps he'd done one," Bradstreet suggested placidly.

"If he had, his condition wouldn't have been excessive. I saw a chap, in just such a state, who'd been taken red-handed. Dazed, pin-point pupils, the same deep gasping respiration. The only difference was, Rattray had better co-ordination. He came flying into the room. His manner was damned odd, too. Charged at me, as furious as dammit, the jealous husband, all that sort of stuff: then collapsed, and ran to her like a little boy to mamma. God! Yes." Ellis shuddered. "That's just what it was."

"Bit out of season, eh?" commented Bradstreet.

"Bless you, Bradder. You hit the nail on the head every time. That's precisely what it was: a bit out of season. And then, after grovelling like a baby, he recovered like that"—Ellis snapped his fingers an inch off Bradstreet's nose—"and, when I popped my question at him, gave me a damned plausible answer. The whole thing is odd: damned odd."

"I've always thought of him as a bit hysterical and high-strung, like," Bradstreet observed.

"Well—you ought to have seen him last night. I wonder what the hell he'd been up to."

"Nothing so very much, I dare say. That type makes much out of molehills. Mr. Gilkison found anything more?"

"I didn't give him much chance."

Ellis told Bradstreet of the scene in the front room.

"He didn't do any harm," he concluded, "so I didn't tell him off. It would only have upset him, and stiffened him. His own conscience will be much more effective. But I believe him when he says he didn't think it up. I've had him around

once or twice before on a case. He's a good chap. He doesn't interfere or get in the way. In fact, in one case he was the greatest help."

"He may be in this. We shouldn't have found out about the books being taken, only for him. Nor about Nelder."

"Nor about Nelder. Do you think we're going to get anything, Bradder? Or are we on a wild goose chase?"

"I can't say." Bradstreet looked out of the window. "It's as pleasant a way of spending the day as any other, anyhow."

Ellis looked at him admiringly. To this patient, placid man, one day's work was like another. His duty was taking him to Devonport, he would enjoy the journey, untroubled by any speculation about its yield. If the day turned out to be wasted, he would come as cheerfully back again, and there would be another day to-morrow. The only difference between his working days was that some were pleasant and some were unpleasant. This was one of the pleasant days.

The line wound round the spurs of Dartmoor, spilled sharply into the valley of the Tavy, passed Tavistock, somnolent and peaceful with the sun on its grey roofs, ran through the woods, and came out by the broad prospect of the Tamar. A few minutes, and they were in Devonport, in streets which the sun seemed to have sealed up into a prim emptiness.

"Where is this pub?" Ellis asked.

"Off Durnford Street."

"Shall we go there straight, or have lunch first?"

"It's twenty past twelve. What do you think?"

"He'll be there afterwards, I suppose?"

"He will. He's expecting us."

"Good. The longer we keep him the better. When's our train home, did you say?"

"Ten to five."

"Good. Time for tea before we start. Lunch, then, Bradder. Lunch by all means."

"It'll be pretty near one by the time we get it." Bradstreet was smiling, with the glee of a man evading his conscience.

The hotel recommended by Bradstreet was some little way away, and, as he prophesied, it was five to one before the first dish was set before them. They lunched royally together, their liking for each other swelling and warming as the meal progressed. They did not hurry, but gave their meal ample time to settle—in Ellis's phrase—and Nelder ample time to grow impatient or apprehensive, according to his mood.

The hotel at which he was staying had the particular look

of respectability that manages at a second glance to suggest something sinister. It fitted so perfectly the character given Nelder by Gilkison that Ellis laughed.

A man of mildly horsey appearance sauntered casually up to them as they approached.

"All right?" Bradstreet asked him.

"Yes, sir. He's there. In the far corner of the lounge."

They went in, and saw a figure in the corner, sitting with crossed legs, reading one of the more popular newspapers. He raised an eye as they entered, and regarded them with bilious distaste. The face was at first sight handsome; but a nearer view showed that the features added up to a fatal commonness, and the expression was unpleasant. Perhaps it was unfair to judge of the man's looks at the moment, for he was manifestly in a very bad temper.

Bradstreet accosted him benignly.

"Mr. Nelder?"

"That's my name."

"We'd be glad of a little private conversation with you. Is there anywhere else we can go?"

"I've nothing to say to you or anyone else that can't be said here."

"Happy man," Ellis purred, and received an envenomed glance.

"That's all right, then."

Bradstreet sat down opposite him, and Ellis pulled up a leather armchair.

"Nice weather," he observed. "You don't get the best of it in here."

Bradstreet proceeded to business.

"We are police officers, Mr. Nelder. We are enquiring into the death of Mr. Matthew Baildon, of West Nattering, and we wish to ask you a few questions."

"You're wasting your time," Nelder replied. "I never went near him. I don't know a thing about it."

"We're well aware of your movements during your stay at West Nattering, Mr. Nelder," Ellis intervened smoothly. "We require no information on that subject. What we would like to hear from you is your reason for visiting the place."

"I've a right to go where I like, haven't I?"

"Indubitably, Mr. Nelder. Provided that on your travels you do not transgress the law."

"Who says I have?"

"Nobody, so far. We have no doubt you had an excellent reason for your visit. Won't you tell us what it was?"

"You have no right to ask me to account for my movements."

Ellis beamed on him.

"The village of West Nattering, though it has a certain old-world charm, is not at first sight a likely theatre for the activities of a keen man of business like yourself. There is only one feature which could attract you—unless you are fond of watching fish? No. I thought not—only one feature you would find interesting. You are, I understand, a bibliophile? Would that be a fair description? Yes. Then the only feature which could conceivably attract you, in default of the fish, is the library of the late Mr. Matthew Baidon."

There was a silence, disturbed only by Nelder's noisy breathing.

"Am I right?" Ellis asked, with innocent wide-open eyes.

"I don't see why you expect me to tell you my business secrets."

"Heaven forbid!" Ellis exclaimed piously. "But there is no secret about your interest in Matt Baidon's books. You communicated it quite openly to a third party."

"If you know all about it, why are you asking me?"

"Only God knows all, Mr. Nelder. We are but police officers. We would like your corroboration of our few discoveries and our poor surmises. For example: you informed Mr. Stuyvesant, a wealthy American citizen over here on a visit, that Matt Baidon was open to offers for certain books. Where did you get that information?"

"I said before, I'm not giving away any business secrets."

"I'm afraid we shall have to ask you to make an exception in favour of this one."

Ellis's voice was smooth as oil.

"And if I don't?"

"A very unpleasant construction might be put upon your refusal. By judge and jury."

"You can't bluff me," Nelder said, after a pause.

"We have no wish to. No need to. You must remember that, once information has passed between two parties, there are always two avenues through which it may be recovered. At least two. Come, Mr. Nelder. In your own interest you had better answer the question. How did you hear that Matt Baidon wished to sell a portion of his library?"

Nelder's face set into a sulky obstinacy, weakened by uneasiness.

"We know that it was not from Baidon himself," Ellis pursued, "since he did all his business through one man, Mr.

Paul Gilkison, of Vigo Street. Mr. Gilkison has assured us of that."

The mention of his competitor did the trick. Nelder's face twisted in animosity and contempt.

"That's all he knows," he sneered. "I can tell him different. I've handled as much of Matt Baildon's stuff as he has, and more too."

"Well, well. That is very interesting. How did you get hold of it?"

Nelder flushed to the colour of milk chocolate.

"What do you mean?" he said violently. "How could anyone get hold of it?"

"That is precisely the question. I asked how *you* got hold of it."

"How do you think?"

"I could think of several ways," Ellis told him dreamily. "But I don't want to match my ingenuity against yours in a field where I should be at a very grave disadvantage. I'd rather hear from you."

Nelder pursed his lips together. There was a short silence, broken by Bradstreet.

"Let's take one thing at a time," he suggested amiably. "It may be quite enough for our purpose if Mr. Nelder will tell us how he got his information this time."

"Capital, Bradder. Capital. You bring me back from abstract speculation to the present. Never indulge in abstract speculation, Mr. Nelder, except when you are in a hot bath. Even then, don't go on too long, or you'll wake up and find the water has gone cold on you. How did you get the information which you gave to Mr. Stuyvesant?"

Nelder still said nothing.

Ellis sighed.

"It is in your interest to tell us. It may take us a long time to find it out for ourselves, but find it out we shall."

"I had a letter," Nelder said at last.

"From Matt Baildon?"

"No."

"From whom, then?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, oh, oh."

"May we see the letter?"

"You don't suppose I carry all my business correspondence around the country with me, do you?"

"Only the letters that belong to the business in hand. Show us the letter, please."

Nelder struggled with his feelings. At last he put his hand into his inside breast pocket, drew out a wallet, and from it extracted a folded piece of paper which he pushed sulkily over.

Bradstreet leaned across, and Ellis opened it, holding it where he could see it too. It was typewritten, on a half sheet of coarse, bluish notepaper, unsigned, and bore neither address nor date.

"Dear Sir,

If you are still interested in the library of Mr. Baildon, it will be to your advantage to call as before."

Ellis looked up.

"When did you get this, Mr. Nelder?"

"Monday."

"You allowed some days to elapse?"

"Couldn't get off at a minute's notice."

"You know the writer?"

"No."

"But—on your own evidence, and the evidence of the letter here, this is not your first transaction of the kind? You told us that a number of Matt Baildon's books had been through your hands?"

"So they have."

"From whom did you buy them? From the writer of this letter?"

"How do I know who wrote the letter? You can see for yourself, it's not signed. Not a thought-reader, am I?"

"All right. With whom did you do business on the previous occasions? Come, Mr. Nelder. You aren't going to tell us that the books came to you of their own accord. They were not posted to you, but delivered personally. The letter makes that clear. Very well, then. Who delivered them?"

"I tell you, I don't know."

"Was it a man, or a woman?"

"A woman," Nelder said sulkily.

"Young or old?"

"I don't know. She was all muffled up. It was winter, I tell you, and dark. I didn't see her face."

"You met out of doors, then. Nelder, Nelder! was that well done?"

"I paid for the books. Paid a damned good price for them. What does it matter where it was?"

"A muffled woman, out of doors, in the dark. Are most of your purchases made under those conditions?"

"If people like play-acting, it's no concern of mine. I paid for the books, and got 'em."

"It never occurred to you to wonder whether old Matt gave the transaction his blessing, I suppose? In other words, whether you were receiving stolen goods?"

"Why the hell should I think that? It's only chaps like you that go around thinking the worst of people."

Ellis shot at long range.

"All the same, the books never appeared in your catalogue."

Nelder licked his lips.

"That doesn't mean anything. Lots of the books I sell don't go into the catalogue."

"I can well believe that. Would you recognise the woman if you saw her again?"

"I tell you, I never saw her face."

"There was no trick of voice or gesture?"

"She spoke all muffled, too."

"Was she short or tall?"

"I don't know. Sort of medium, I think. I didn't notice."

"In too much of a hurry to get away with the swag," Ellis observed.

"Look here, you've got no right to talk like that. I tell you, I paid for the books, and paid a good price too, which is more than some would——"

"——for stolen property," Ellis finished for him. "Quite. Well, well. A very nice story. Unsavoury, perhaps, but vivid. I can only see one gap in it."

Nelder's head jerked upwards belligerently.

"What's that?"

"You can give no clear account of the person who sold you the books, because the transaction, or transactions, took place in winter, and it was dark. Correct?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

"You did. You did indeed. But you forgot one interesting point."

"Eh?"

"We are now in the middle of June. It wasn't dark on Thursday, Nelder. Nor on Friday."

The unhealthy face blanched. "What d'you mean?"

"The latest parcel, Nelder. The books you bought this time. You had every opportunity to see the other party. The light lasts long into the evening at this time of year. It's warm, too. I even doubt if she was muffled up."

The room was very silent. Nelder said nothing at all. His eyes flickered and half closed.

Ellis waited for a few seconds, then went on, in friendly conversational tone.

"A number of books are missing from Matt Baidon's library. We know exactly which they are—titles, dates, all particulars. You have admitted to making previous purchases. You have also admitted that you were here in response to this letter. I think, on these facts, that we are entitled to ask you two questions. One, what have you done with the books? Two, who sold them to you?"

When Nelder spoke, his words came out singly, cautiously, like animals coming from their lair after an alarm.

"Who said I 'ad the books?"

"No one. We just inferred it."

"Not the same thing as proving it, mister."

Ellis shrugged.

"You will find them hard to dispose of." He waited for a gleam in Nelder's eye, but the lid veiled it. "Unless you have passed them on already. I think not, however. There are better buyers in London than in the West."

"Prove that I've got 'em, before you start guessing what I've done with 'em."

"Yes. Yes. We do things in our own good time."

Nelder's confidence was returning. His face creased stiffly into a leer.

"Another thing," he said. "Supposin'—I don't admit a word of it, mind you, from start to finish—but *supposin'* it was the wife or daughter sold the books, or had 'em sold; now that the old boy's dead, who did they steal 'em from?"

Ellis nodded four or five times.

"A pretty point. Provided, of course, the transaction took place after Matt's death."

"Supposin' it didn't—mind you, I'm not admitting——"

"Yes. Yes. We know."

"Supposin' there was a sale, and it was before 'e'died: who's goin' to charge the bloke who bought the books?"

"You can leave all that to us." Ellis got up. "Well, Mr. Nelder, it's been a most instructive conversation. Thank you so much. We needn't keep you any longer from the fresh air and the sunshine. That is, unless you have anything to ask, Bradder?"

"No." Bradstreet stood up. He looked down on Nelder. "We shall want you for the inquest. I'll let you know."

"I can't hang around all the week at your convenience," Nelder exclaimed truculently.

"You may go where you like, so long as we know where you are, and you can get to West Nattering in time."

"It's damned inconvenient to a business man."

"There are worse inconveniences," Ellis drawled. "One of 'em's on the moor, not so far from here. Take it easy, Nelder. You're getting out of this very lightly, so far. Oh no, thank you. We keep the letter."

They went out before Nelder could reply.

"Well, Bradder," Ellis said comfortably, as they sought the shady side of the glaring street. "What do you make of that?"

"That poor soul," Bradstreet sighed. "I suppose she's been scraping for Joan that way for a while now."

"How could she risk it, Bradder? Gilk says the old boy knew where every book was."

"He's been getting infirm these last three or four years. I doubt if he could come to the top shelves alone. He made Joan get the books for him."

"Even then, there was always the chance that he'd ask for one of the missing books. She was taking a big risk, poor woman."

"I don't look on that as thieving in the ordinary way," Bradstreet said. "The books were coming to them in the long run. She was only taking a little on account."

"Bradder, Bradder! These are highly immoral sentiments from a pillar of the force."

"Are they? I can't help it." Bradstreet's face was placid.

"I thought I was the only thoroughly immoral man on this job. I'm surprised at you, all the same. You'll be telling me in a minute you wouldn't blame her if she scuppered the old So-and-So."

"No," Bradstreet said. "I wouldn't go that far. But, if I'd been her, I'd have been tempted."

"Put it there, pal. You and me's buddies. Now—let's forget that unsavoury fellow and his ugly face. I prescribe a nice ride, and a scramble on the Hoe. Do you scramble, Bradder? My grandmother used to recommend me to go for a scramble. It sounds so nice. Come on. Give us an appetite for our tea, and then—home. Lord—it's hot."

Bradstreet looked at the sky, screwing his face into a small boy's grimace.

"Sun's scalding," he said. "Looks like thunder."

"Will it rain? I loathe getting wet."

"Not yet, I reckon."

CHAPTER TWENTY

ELLIS woke next morning from deep sleep, and lay staring at the ceiling. It looked back at him, unnaturally bland, reflecting the sunlight from outside, which, thrown up by a neighbouring roof, was reaching it before it reached the walls. There had been a storm the evening before, with heavy showers, and more than once in the night Ellis had heard the rain.

For a few seconds his mind floated, like an untroubled cloud: and he wondered at it, since somewhere, far below, there lurked a feeling that it should not be untroubled, and, therefore, he felt the beginnings of a vague surprise.

Then, with a shock that twisted some little cold thing in his stomach, he remembered the long and fruitless discussion he had had with Bradstreet on the way home, and afterwards. Was there any possible way of keeping Nelder's evidence out, and so protecting Mrs. Baildon and Joan?

Bradstreet, with the slow casuistry of the countryman, had argued that to put in the evidence was to prejudice the Baidons' case, and so defeat the ends of justice. The question of stealing books was irrelevant to the graver charge which overhung and which so easily might fall upon them. Why, then, bring it in?

And Ellis, feeling for the man, loving him, and wishing with all his heart that they could do as they wished, felt bound to put the other side: knowing all the time that Bradstreet saw it as clearly as he did, and would be constrained by it.

"After all, Bradder," Ellis had asked him brutally, "who do you think *did* scupper Matt?"

And Bradstreet, with a sigh that was almost a groan, could only answer, "I don't know. I try not to think about it."

So, remembering all this, Ellis's face darkened, till he looked like a dissipated and sulky cherub, and he jumped out of bed with an oath, a cloud over his day.

The cloud did not prevent him from making a very robust breakfast. Volatile and highly suggestible, he had reacted to the cheering influence of silky porridge, of pink, crisped bacon and eggs, of toast and marmalade and hot strong coffee, when the little waitress, to whom he and all he did were a perpetual marvel, summoned him to the telephone.

Ellis stumped across the room, napkin in hand, and belched as he reached the instrument.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo. Bradder? Well, how goes it? Thought up a solution to our puzzle of last night?"

"No." Bradstreet's voice was grave. "I've got something more serious to think about. Eunice Caunter's been found murdered."

"Good God! how? Where?"

"Strangled. On Higworthy Common, a mile from the camp."

Ellis whistled.

"I'll come right along."

"I'm sending a car. Save time."

Ellis returned hastily to the table, told the news to a shocked and startled Gilkison, gulped down another cup of coffee, and was ready for the car. The constable who was driving explained that they had to pick up the photographer, and that Inspector Bradstreet would be ready for them when they returned. It was the quickest way round.

The photographer was collected, carrying a large tripod and looking apprehensive. He got in beside the driver, and they drove to the station. Bradstreet came out at once.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. But it'd have taken longer to fetch him first."

"That's all right. Where d'you say she is?"

"Higworthy. Won't take us long."

"Seen her?"

"Yes. Left the sergeant in charge."

"Who found her?"

"Chap taking his dog for a run. He told the village constable, who rang us."

The morning was unnaturally clear, and a pearly cloud or two drifted low down on the horizon. The grasses gleamed with drops.

"It must have rained a lot. That should help."

Bradstreet grunted. "I've never found it did, very much."

He was disinclined to talk. Inside five minutes the car drove on to a small common that rose a little above the road, and was dotted with generous furse bushes.

"Popular resort, at night?" Ellis asked.

"M'm."

"Godsend to the camp, I should say."

"We've had complaints."

The local man was keeping a lookout. He signalled to them, then approached. Evidently he was in a high state of excitement. He began a fresh account to Bradstreet, stammering in his eagerness, but the Inspector cut him short.

They followed a trodden path for a hundred and fifty yards, then turned off among the bushes. The furze grew high : each bush was a complete protection.

"She mightn't have been found for weeks in here," Ellis said to Bradstreet.

"No. But there's a good many people about this time of year."

Ellis glanced at the wrappings and empty packets of cigarettes that lay in the shelter of several of the bushes. They rounded an extra large one, and came on the sergeant.

"Here you are, sir."

Eunice Caunter was lying on her back. One leg was straight, the other bent sideways. Her skirt was partly pulled back, and the bent leg showed a stretch of thigh between her stocking and her knickers. Her clothes were soaked with rain. One arm was flung stiffly outwards, with some torn ends of grass clutched in her rigid fingers.

The face was turned away. They had to walk round her to see it. It was not pleasant : there was no doubt about the way she had died. A purplish bruise on each side of her throat confirmed that she had been strangled.

Ellis uttered an exclamation, and fell on his knees. He looked close, then turned to Bradstreet a face from which the colour had gone.

"Good God ! seen this ? "

Bradstreet nodded glumly. Ellis looked back, shuddering. Into each of the dead girl's nostrils something had been inserted. It looked like paper.

"What's the sense of that ? " Ellis said, half to himself.

"Stop her breathing, perhaps ? "

"Couldn't be. Unless he plugged 'em and then held a hand over her mouth. She'd never let him. No, this was done afterwards. Some perversion here. I don't like it, Bradder."

He got up, brushing his knees absently. There was a wet stain on each. "Have 'em photographed," he said. †

They stood by while the photographer did his work. The poor man's hand shook, and the sergeant kindly came to his help. He looked very pale about the gills. Then the sergeant came over to where Ellis and Bradstreet stood.

"I've had another look round, sir," he reported to Bradstreet. "There's hardly a sign. The rain has washed it all out. The soil is very light hereabouts," he explained to Ellis. "It takes impressions fairly well, but they come out just as easy. The grass is all freshened up with the rain, too. It's hardly crushed at all where she struggled."

"It was a strong man did that," Ellis said. "She was a well-built girl. She wouldn't go easily. Unless he did it suddenly, as a climax to lovemaking."

Both Bradstreet and the sergeant appeared to be shocked at this. Each avoided the other's eye, and neither looked at Ellis. Ellis observed Bradstreet from screwed-up eyes.

"What's your theory, then, Bradder? Someone from the camp?"

"I don't know that I've got one," Bradstreet mumbled. "Bit early in the day."

"Apparently respectable young ladies have been known to find a uniform attractive. A sexy piece: I wouldn't put it past her. What was she doing here, anyway?" His voice rasped irritably. "Snap out of it, Bradder! I know this is the village where nothing goes wrong, but we've been bumping into the exceptions that prove the rule."

Bradstreet regarded him from level gray eyes.

"I've known Miss Caunter ever since she came here six years ago. She often used to take a walk by herself in the evening. We have never had any reason to believe that there was any illicit interest."

"What an old Puritan you are. Why shouldn't the girl have a boy friend?"

"No reason. Saving that I wouldn't expect a lady of her bringing up to go in the bushes on Higworthy Common."

"All right. I gather you don't know of any boy friend?"

"Miss Caunter never showed any particular interest in any man in these parts. Not to my knowledge. Did you ever hear to the contrary, sergeant?"

"No, sir." The sergeant was blushing profusely.

"You want to make it rape by a maniac. Well: you may be right."

He looked back at the body, grotesquely foreshortened from where they stood.

"Poor girl. There's a good many like her going sour up and down the country. It's a mad world we live in. Good. Our friend has finished. Come along."

He walked briskly to the body, the others slowly following. Kneeling down again, he took from his pocket a small, flat tin, which looked as if it had once contained lozenges, and extracted from it a fine-pointed tweezers. Then, his own nose wrinkled with repugnance, he extracted the plug from each nostril, and laid the two little pieces of paper in the lid of the tin. He then fetched out the fat pocket knife, and selected a long, straight probe.

A thought struck him. He looked up at Bradstreet.

"What did Carter make of these?"

"He hasn't seen her. He's in the middle of a baby case. We couldn't get him."

"Just as well. I'd rather have the outsider."

"We've always found Dr. Carter very good. Most conscientious and reliable," Bradstreet said, a little stiffly.

"Not a word against him," Ellis sang back. "Not a syllable. But t'other chap doesn't know her from Adam—from Eve, rather—and it leaves him freer. Now then. Hold the tin, will you? Watch and see I don't cheat."

Bradstreet took the tin, and Ellis, using probe and tweezers, delicately unfolded the two little pieces of sodden paper. He had to go carefully; even so, he tore the first. It proved to be blank. As Ellis spread out the second, Bradstreet caught his breath. Blurred but readable, it held a fragment of a written message: the end of one word, and the start of another. There were three letters only: "t se."

"—t se—" said Ellis thoughtfully. "Not secret. Discreet seamstress. Hot semolina."

For the first time Bradstreet's broad face showed emotion. A spasm of bewilderment convulsed it.

"Semolina!" he cried, loud with surprise. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Fat serpent. Wet seaweed. Get set. Best selected." He opened innocent eyes at Bradstreet. "I'm only trying to fit words to the letters. There's such a wide selection. Last seven. Must sell."

"That's better," growled Bradstreet. "It don't need to be nothing so out of the way as what you said first. Things are complicated enough without making up any more."

"Lined paper," Ellis said. "Of course, the piece may be torn out of the middle, but, as you see, there's a bit of the line showing above the writing, and though it's no wider really than the space between the two words, I'm inclined to bet that these letters are the first line of whatever it was. What do you say?"

"In that case, it wouldn't be nothing about semolina," said Bradstreet, with whom the suggestion seemed to rankle.

"Unless it was a shopping list. '1 pkt semolina. 2 oz. baking soda' and so on. Don't you like milk puddings, Bradder? Never mind: I don't insist on it. What's your guess?"

"I don't see much point in guessing, until we know some more. But if it was the first line, it might be 'I can't see you

to-night,' or something of the sort. That is"—he paused, in some confusion.

"—if the poor girl was involved with someone. Bradder, that's brilliant, simple and probable. Full marks. Go up top. But, as you meant, though you didn't say it, it would be better still if we could find the rest of the message. Have a search made? I'm no good at that sort of thing."

He suddenly became excited.

"I'm hopeful about this. If the murderer tore up that bit of paper inadvertently—the first bit that came to his hand—we stand a good chance of finding the rest of it. He'll have chucked it away, or stuck it back in his pocket. I think the odds are it was inadvertent; otherwise, why use this particular bit of paper?"

"Unless it was a letter she wrote him, that angered him."

"In that case, why use only one tiny bit of it? Besides, it's such a damning thing: such an obvious clue. He couldn't have left it on purpose."

"Not without it was to mislead us." Bradstreet was still back in dialect, a sure sign that he was moved.

"I don't think so. I think the action—the putting of the paper there at all—is pathological. Something in the nature of a compulsion."

Bradstreet wrinkled his brow.

"You mean, the murder's a madman's work?"

"Perhaps. Not necessarily. A sort of kink, coming to the surface in the excitement of the murder."

"Criminals do queer things. Leave their trademarks, as you might say. But I never saw one like this."

"Have a search made for the paper, anyway."

"That I will."

Bradstreet went across to the sergeant. Ellis shut away the pieces of paper in the tin, and put it in his pocket. He squatted down, and cleaned the tweezers and probe by thrusting them several times into the turf. Bradstreet, turning round, beheld him in astonishment. He looked for all the world like a small boy crouching over a frog in the grass.

Ellis stood up, beating his palms together.

"Doctor coming out here?"

"The ambulance will be here for her in a minute. What he's got to do can be done better elsewhere."

"Shall we wait?"

"Do you want to look around?"

"I'm no good at it, Bradder. When it comes to crawling about with a magnifying glass, I fade right out. I can do

something with the stuff when it's found: but someone else has got to find it for me."

"I've given orders to bring in every piece of paper on the common," Bradstreet said soberly. "You'll have something to work on."

"Good God. It'll take years."

"No. I can get half a dozen men on to it: and it's all in just a few places."

"You believe in doing the thing thoroughly."

"Well, we don't know where he'd throw the paper away. He may have dropped it nearby. He may have put it in his pocket, and thrown it away later, especially if he was the sort you say, not thinking what he was doing, like."

Ellis looked at him with a fresh access of respect. Though upset and ruffled by Ellis's flippancy, Bradstreet had taken in all the possibilities arising from his suggestion, and had acted methodically upon them.

"You don't want to look around yourself, Bradder?"

"I had a look when I was out here before."

"You don't miss much, I expect."

"I'm not very quick. Hallo. Here are the ambulance chaps. Yes. All clear. Go ahead." He turned to Ellis. "We needn't wait," he said, almost pleadingly.

They walked away together towards the car.

"Sorry for being unpleasant," Ellis said. "Fact is, I hate this sort of thing, and it always makes me show off. Like laughing when you hear bad news. Can't help it. Never have been able to."

"I know," Bradstreet said unexpectedly. "I've often wanted to laugh in church myself."

"Yes. But you don't do it, Bradder. You've got some self-control. I've none. My wife tells me I'm not even adolescent yet."

They reached the car.

"What do we do now? Till we start on the waste paper basket?"

"I know what I do," Bradstreet said.

"Yes. I'd like to use the phone for a few minutes first, if I may."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE AMOUNT of paper brought in an hour later was not as great as Ellis had expected—and this in spite of the fact that the collectors had interpreted their instructions very generously, and brought in toffee papers and a cigarette carton or two. It did not take long to sort the damp basketful : and the result, although it brought to light two or three interesting love letters, and one that was quite startlingly obscene, was completely negative. No fragment belonging to or at all resembling the two small pieces was in the collection.

The question of handwriting had naturally not been overlooked : but in practice it is not easy to identify a hand by three letters, especially when these three letters show every sign of having been scrawled in haste. Ellis and Bradstreet pored over their precious clue, with the uneasy feeling that at each fresh scrutiny its value was decreasing. Finally Bradstreet got up, and announced that he was going to the dead girl's place to have a look round.

The words touched off a spring in Ellis. He swore, and started to his feet.

"Here am I, ferreting about in all this rubbish instead of doing my job. I told you I was no good at this sort of thing."

"What is your job, if this isn't?"

"People. People are my job. Human beings. I should have been up at the Baildons', seeing that this thing doesn't get to that poor child with too violent a shock. It's bound to be bad for her : but it needn't reach her in the crudest way, from errand boys and such. I ought to have gone there right away."

"I don't think so. If we'd got something here, we might have had to act right away."

"You could have done that for me, Bradder. No. I've fallen down on my job. I'll go right along."

He plodded off, and, reaching the Baildons', found his fears confirmed. Seeking out Mrs. Baildon in the kitchen, he learned, with renewed self-accusation, that Joan had heard the news from the gleeful lips of Jane Exworthy, and received a severe shock. She was now lying down in her room and could see nobody. Ellis sighed.

"That's my fault, Mrs. Baildon, I'm afraid. I should have come here at once, and broken the news to her quietly."

Mrs. Baildon looked at him. Her expression was the most difficult to read that he had ever encountered. One could read

almost anything into it—irony, blame, disapproval, deep reserve: but the big eyes, that at first gave a vaguely mournful look to the face, were so blank and so queerly lit that they made the face into a mask, whether for comedy or tragedy Ellis could not determine.

He set himself to penetrate beneath it, to exact from this silent woman one recognisable, definite human note. The look and tone with which she told him of Joan's retirement conveyed nothing at all. She might have been an uninterested shop assistant telling a customer the price of some article not in stock.

"Your daughter is going through a very trying time, Mrs. Baildon. I hope it will soon be over."

"Yes."

"A good girl. She must have been a great comfort to you."

"Yes."

"Don't think I don't appreciate what you've been through, too. We policemen have to do unpleasant things from time to time; but they don't rob us of the power to sympathise with our fellow-creatures in misfortune."

Evidently Mrs. Baildon did not feel that this deserved a reply. Privately, Ellis agreed with her. He tried another tack.

"This poor girl that's been murdered. Can you tell us anything that would help us, do you think?"

She shook her head.

"Did you know her well?"

"Not to say well."

"She came here a good deal, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"Did she never talk to you? Tell you about herself?"

Mrs. Baildon shook her head.

"It would be only natural for a girl, living by herself, to expand a little in the company of friends."

"I didn't see her much. She and Joan were together working."

"She never talked to you about herself."

"No more than to say she had a cold, or what someone had given her for Christmas."

Ellis looked at her steadily, with a gaze which nineteen people out of twenty found disconcerting. She met it with her own, not the resolute blank of the poker player, but a relaxed nothingness; steady, but void of interest or enquiry; expressionless, but not at all mad. Ellis was well used to the faces of criminals and others who have much to hide, but this was wholly baffling.

He held it a full half minute, during which time it neither wavered nor concentrated. She could have stared at him silently for an hour without embarrassment.

"Then you can tell me nothing? Nothing to help us catch the man who killed her?"

She shook her head slowly, as if in wonder; and stood waiting for him.

"That's a pity," Ellis said. "Maybe Miss Attwill may be able to help. She seems very observant."

A faint flicker came over the smooth face.

"It wouldn't do to take too much notice of everything Martha says."

"No?" said Ellis encouragingly.

"What she doesn't know she makes up."

Spoken in a level tone, the remark seemed to hold no touch of malice. Mrs. Baildon sounded as objective as if she were talking about something in a greenhouse.

"She's very kindhearted, I know," said Ellis, with a smile. "I dare say she wouldn't want to disappoint me."

To his surprise she smiled briefly back.

"You've hit her," she said. "That's Martha. Mind you, she's a very sensible woman. Her mind's very active."

"And she hasn't enough to occupy it. I see."

The ghost of life had left her face. She regarded the subject as exhausted.

"Well," Ellis told her, "bearing what you've said in mind, I'll go and see Miss Attwill, and see what she has to say. Good-bye. And tell Joan not to worry. Not much good, I'm afraid, poor child."

"She's the worrying age," replied Mrs. Baildon: and Ellis took his leave of her and departed, feeling that he had been completely and effortlessly outwitted. A poised and determined antagonist was one thing, but this woman, who did not exert herself, whose whole attitude had not a trace of tension—he had never met her like.

As he passed the door of the front room, Gilkison popped out and called after him in a sibilant whisper.

"Good God, Gilk! Have you been taking elocution lessons from a cobra?"

Gilkison made his usual offended pause.

"I thought you might like to know something that happened," he said. "That's all."

"Happened when? While I've been talking to Mrs. B.?"

"No. Before."

"Why didn't you tell me when I came in?"

"I didn't hear you."

"Good Lord. Well—go on. What is it?"

"Only that this morning, before the news came about the schoolmistress, I found those two had been upstairs, dusting the books. In here, too. They were both very friendly, and said they ought to have done it before, and did I get very dirty, and so on."

"Yes?"

"Nothing more. Only I got the idea they were doing it to cover up traces that might show in the dust. Traces of other substitutions, or plain thefts."

"Might be," Ellis said.

"I had an idea, too. What about finger-prints on the substituted books?"

"No good."

"You mean, there aren't any?"

"It doesn't matter how many there are. Matt had to ask 'em to fetch any book he wanted. Their prints have a right to be on any and every book in the place. Thanks for suggesting it, all the same."

Gilkison looked hard at him, and flushed.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"I laugh at you often and regularly, my dear Gilkie. You are one of the joys of my drab existence. But I am not laughing at you now. For the matter of that, I'm not laughing at anything. Well—thanks again for telling me."

"Where are you going?"

"To see Martha Attwill. I've an idea she'll be helpful about this business. So long."

"You haven't time. It's close on one o'clock."

"Lord. So it is. We must have been longer over that waste-paper basket than I thought."

"That *what*?"

Ellis explained. "Look here," he added. "I must go to see the old hen. Tell 'em I'll be late."

Whether Ellis's idea was well founded he did not discover. Miss Attwill's door was shut. Milk stood on the step, and a parcel was half hidden near the door. A note held under the knocker announced in bold scrawly characters: "Gone away for the day. Please leave as usual. M. A."

Disappointed, Ellis turned and went slowly back to the inn. This second murder had deeply depressed him. He kept seeing the misused, tumbled body, the swollen face. Avid for sensation, she had had her will, poor girl, shortly and finally. And there was nothing of the murderess about her. She had

seemed strong, self-centred, capable. You couldn't tell, though, how love would take a girl, making her exigent, clinging, reproachful, a creator of scenes. Or were Bradder and Co. right, and was Eunice Caunter victim of a common rape? A girl so strongly built might have fought so hard there was no other way to quiet her?

Ellis shook himself. This was no accidental crime, he felt in his bones. It was the outcome of a relationship. But had it anything to do with what had already happened? If so, what? Where was the connection?

He was in a thoroughly bad temper by the time he reached the hotel. Gilkison had only just started his meal. To Ellis, his appearance seemed smug: but, as he said nothing, and asked no question, he gave no outlet for ill temper.

Ellis prodded viciously with his fork.

"Potatoes aren't cooked," he growled.

Gilkison raised his eyebrows. "Mine are all right," he observed, with an expression that implied polite disbelief.

"Call me a liar, and have done with it."

"By all means. If it will give you any pleasure." He took a little more mustard. "Wasn't Miss Attwill helpful?"

"She wasn't anything, blast her. She was out."

"Going to try again after lunch?"

"May be something else to do by then. Sorry, Gilk. I'm all on edge. I hate these gaps in a case, when one's waiting for something to happen."

"What do you expect to happen?"

"Any of about five things. Or all at once."

"Sounds very dramatic."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it."

Ellis's antagonism rose again. Gilkison had a knack, quite unintentional, of flicking his nerves. He looked at the neat, careful scholar, eating his food so discreetly, so self-containedly, and thought, he ought to have been born a governess; then proceeded to imagine such a series of adventures for this feminine incarnation of Gilkie that he began to grin, and, his humour restored, attacked his food with ferocious relish.

He read for twenty minutes when the meal was over, to aid digestion—an unnecessary precaution, since he had the digestion of a horse—then went up to his room, pulled the furniture about, sat down, and wrote another letter to his wife, giving her a fresh report on the case, and adding his solution.

"If I'm right," he concluded, "we shan't be long. It's true there are gaps, and I've had to advance more than one motive, which I never like. But what other explanation fits the facts?"

He sealed the letter and posted it, resisting the temptation to keep it open for the medical evidence and any possible discovery which Bradstreet might make among the dead girl's belongings. Ellis inclined always to the school of thought which looks to character and motive for a solution, and regards circumstantial evidence as confirmation rather than as proof. His sense of character and his intuitions were so strong that in most cases this arrogant method brought success. Every now and then, however, it came a cropper: and the feeling deepened that this was to be a case in the latter class. He wished that he could get back his letter. Why volunteer a solution before all the evidence was in? A bundle of love-letters in the girl's rooms, the discovery of the rest of the paper from which those grisly little plugs were torn, the arrest of a soldier—anything might knock his theory cock-eyed and expose him once more as a self-confident fathead to the one person in the world who had best reason to know he was one, and whom, therefore, he had best reason not to furnish with additional and quite gratuitous evidence on the point.

Returning from the post, Ellis looked at the hotel clock. It said ten to four. He pondered whether to go to the station before tea, decided against it, and went into the garden. He tried to read, but found that he couldn't concentrate. Finally, in an angry fever of impatience, he decided that he couldn't wait till half-past four for his tea, went inside, and rang the bell.

When the little waitress appeared, he put his head on one side at her.

"Do you think I could have tea early? I have to go off and work."

She smiled at him. "I'll see, sir."

In a minute she reappeared. "Yes, sir. It'll be ready in about ten minutes."

"Good. Thank you so much."

But it was a long ten minutes; and Ellis, as he ate his tea, was all the time listening for the telephone, and so did not enjoy his meal.

"You fool," he apostrophised himself. "What's come to you? Steady. Steady the Buffs."

But no nursery phrases, no self-exhortation would still that little crawling toad of apprehension inside him: and, as he realised its insistence, Ellis felt real alarm, for he knew it of old, the extra sense that, reacting almost physically as to a coming change in the weather, presaged always something ugly, violent, unforeseen, something which took the conscious

planning brain by surprise; though the unconscious mind, perceiving it all too well, tried with these frantic signals to warn its crass colleague before the happening was precipitated upon them.

Gilkison came in just as Ellis was standing up and wiping his mouth.

"I didn't wait for you. Sorry. I'm off to the station. Anything new?"

"Not so far."

"Joan about yet?"

"I heard her mother go up to her and ask if she'd like some tea."

"M'm. I'll give her a miss, I think."

The weather was hot, no longer with the serene steady heat which had met them when they came down, but an uneasy heat, the sun flaming through a clear, thin air. Walking and the tea he had drunk brought Ellis out in a sweat. He pulled out a handkerchief, and mopped his high, crimson forehead.

"Hallo," Bradstreet said. "I've just been ringing you, but they said you'd started."

"Got anything?"

"Yes and no. First, Wilbraham's report."

He passed Ellis the typewritten sheet with the medical findings. Ellis scanned it.

"Cause of death, strangulation. Bruises on throat and upper arm inflicted before death. H'm. He doesn't think it was rape."

"No." Bradstreet was looking at something on his desk.

"On the other hand. . . . Recently, but not so recently as all that. Ye—es. What d'you make of it?"

"It doesn't seem to help us very much."

"Neither your theory nor mine. Unless——"

"Yes?" Bradstreet enquired, after a pause.

"Nothing. Get anything else? Among her effects? Any letters?"

"Nothing to signify. There was a batch of eleven letters from one Maurice, from an address at South Shields, but no more than friendly, and they tailed off. There was eight months between the last two."

"Nothing local?"

"None from anyone we've an eye on. Excepting a few from Joan Baildon. All full of admiration and gratitude. The letters a child would write."

"Not recent, I take it, then."

"They aren't dated. There's one a bit different from the

rest, asking if the girl was offended with her, and what had she done. It had a pencil mark in the margin, and the what-had-she-done part was underlined, with an exclamation mark after it."

"Typical," Ellis said. "Got it here?"

Bradstreet smiled, opened a drawer, and passed over the bundle of letters. Ellis flipped them through.

"Notice how the writing has matured? This little one, about the book she'd borrowed—I'll bet you that's later than the rest. I'll bet you, too, that there were more in between it and the what-have-I-done one, and that this beauty tore 'em up because she didn't like 'em. I know her sort. The sort that cuts her own photo out of a group if she doesn't like it."

He passed the letters back.

"There's been some hellish stuff here, Bradder. Playing up that poor child's feelings."

"Over what?"

"Over Rattray. 'You don't love me any more' when Rattray comes to give the Latin lessons."

"I don't see you've a right to say that. It's conjecture."

"Well, if I'm wronging the dead, I apologise."

"They continued good friends. Miss Caunter was always ready to do what she could to help."

"Leading to Discovery Number Two. Out with it, Bradder. I think I can guess."

Bradstreet looked at him. Ellis grinned into the wide, expressionless face.

"Miss Caunter was the muffled lady who handed Nelder the books," he said.

Bradstreet took something else out of the drawer.

"The anonymous letter was done on her typewriter. So she may have been."

"Understand me, Bradder. I don't mean for a second that the girl turned against Joan, because of Rattray. All I mean is that she belonged to a type that can't help making emotional capital out of everything that occurs. She *had* to play the girl up. She'd play anyone up; at any time, however happy she was. And, since she was probably quite unhappy, and her life lacked drama, she'd be bound to make the most of every chance she got."

"I still don't see—Well, never mind. It doesn't bear on the matter in hand."

"Like half the things I say, Bradder. Only it never does to disregard me entirely, because sometimes I talk sense by accident."

Bradstreet was in no mood for persiflage. He put the letters away in the drawer, and took out a further bundle of papers, and Ellis's small flat tin.

"I've been over a number of samples of her handwriting, and I think you'll agree with me that the most we can say is that she *might* have written the three letters on that little piece of paper."

He passed the papers over to Ellis, who scrutinised them through a magnifying glass, comparing them with the small crumpled piece.

"The 's' is the most like. But it's such a scrawl."

"Her writing varies a lot," Bradstreet commented.

"Typical, again. It was very marked in the letters to Joan that I read. Well, Bradder. Where do we go from here?"

"I've put my men on to all the usual routine. We're checking up on all the men from the camp and aerodrome who had leave last night."

"And the movements of everyone hereabouts."

"Naturally." Bradstreet looked hurt.

"Bless your heart, Bradder. I was afraid you'd tell me it couldn't be any of the local race of Galahads. Now, now. I'm only pulling your leg, and you know it."

Bradstreet's expression suggested that the time and place were unsuitable.

"Who's going to interview some of our more prominent citizens, Bradder? You or I?"

"Which of them have you got in mind?"

"Well—Rattray, for one. It was one of his evenings out. He finishes at nine, he's home by ten. What does he do between nine and ten? What did he do the night before, when he came in so late? Lucky for him she wasn't killed that night. He'd have had something to explain away. He has, as it is: but not her death."

"Seeing she did a full day's work in the school, no," Bradstreet agreed. "I think you'd better tackle him, don't you?"

They looked at each other.

"Perhaps I had. But not yet. I've a half notion in my head . . ."

He told Bradstreet what it was. Bradstreet looked concerned, but nodded slowly.

"Worth trying, I dare say. But I shouldn't play around too long."

"Bradder! What a low view you take of my professional activities."

"Well," said the Devonian doggedly, "you work on rather

fancy lines, if you'll excuse my saying so. Fancy, that is, compared to the likes of me. I just go along my own way."

"And a damned good way too. I admire it. I'd do it, if I could. But I can only go my own."

Bradstreet nodded. "While you're doing your thing, I'll do t'other."

"Choosing a time——"

"Yes. I'll find a tale to satisfy her."

"I think it's as well that the two operations should be independent."

"There may be nothing in it," Bradstreet said. "But, if there is——" He shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"It boils down to two questions, Bradder. Why was she killed? Was it because she knew something? In other words, is her death connected with Matt's, or is it quite irrelevant? My notion can work in either event."

"It's a bit much to ask me to believe, in a little place like this, which I know like the back of my hand, and which has been quiet for years, that two independent murders can take place in four days."

"That's a sound point, Bradder. Even I, who am handicapped by no local knowledge, can allow it some force."

"Local knowledge isn't always a handicap."

"Of course it isn't. But, when it comes to an estimate of possibilities, the outsider and the local man will judge differently. I maintain there's only been one unexpected murder—Eunice's. Half a dozen people, yourself included, have told me they wondered nobody had polished Matt off sooner."

"We might have said it, but we didn't mean it literally."

"Didn't you though. Personally, I always attach great importance to the things people say without meaning them. That is, without knowing they mean them. No, Bradder: the form of words is very important. You not only said you wondered Matt hadn't been killed: you said you wondered his wife or Joan hadn't done it."

"That was only a manner of speaking. I never——"

"Out of the heart the mouth speaketh. On top of all that, you can't claim that Matt's murder was unexpected or outside probability. That leaves you with only one murder to explain: whether it's related to the other or not. Personally, I'm betting that it's not."

"God help us," Bradstreet said, "if we've two murderers to watch out for in this little place."

"God help us indeed. And God helps those that help themselves. Let's get on with it, Bradder."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It was about ten minutes to nine, and Ellis was sitting in the middle of a hedge. It was a wide hedge, less a hedge than a mound, which rose, dipped, and rose again before spilling in furze bushes into a field. Ellis sat in the dip, so placed that he could command the road leading to Rattray's house, and guard against being seen by bending down his head whenever anyone passed. The mound rose behind him, with its furze bushes, and protected him from being seen from behind.

He had been keeping his vigil for over half an hour now, and it was not easy. Midges, made lively by the recent rain, came out of the bushes and the grass, and attacked Ellis vigorously. Slapping and swearing softly, he remembered his gibes at Gilkison in the garden of the inn, and ruefully admitted that nemesis had fallen on him. He dared not smoke, lest a wisp in the still air betray him. There was nothing to do but endure. The grass was still damp in the hollow, too, and it covered invisible but exploratory brambles and sprigs of furze. Grinning at his own exasperation, Ellis remained at his self-appointed post.

Voices came down the road, and a girl went by with a soldier. They must be old friends, Ellis decided ; for the village was humming over Eunice's death, and mothers would keep a tight hold on their girls for weeks to come, even if the murderer were caught. To them, the possibility, the sudden revelation of danger in the familiar spot, would weigh heavier than any reasoning based on a removal of the cause.

A bicycle went by, so swiftly that he hardly heard it till it had passed. A small boy came in the other direction, walking on the grass at the road's edge. If he had not been singing quietly to himself, Ellis would not have heard him.

Then, after maybe five minutes' silence, came a quick step. Ellis bent forward, all attention. The steps came near, and he saw in the gap the figure he was looking for. He let her go by, then, with a nimbleness startling in one of his build, he climbed down, and ran after her.

Lightly though he ran on the grass, she heard him, and whipped round. Her eyes flashed through the glasses. Slowing to a walk, he came up to her, and caught her by the arm.

" Oh no, my dear."

Joan Baildon struggled fiercely to shake off his hand.

" Let me go," she cried. " Let me go, do you hear !"

Her face was white : there were large dark rings under her eyes. She fought him with hysterical strength.

" I will. At once. The moment you promise to go home."

" I shan't. Let me go ! You've no right to stop me."

" We all do things we've no right to do. Go back, my dear. You can't do any good, and you may be in danger. No : it's not the least use. I'm stronger than you."

" I'll call for help," she said, rolling her eyes.

" Again, no good. I represent the law. Be sensible, there's a good girl. I'm stopping you for your own good. Come on : I'll take you home."

She stood rigid for a few seconds, straining mechanically away from him. Then she all but collapsed, and he had to hold her up. She shuddered, and shook herself.

" All right ? "

She nodded, and, apathetically, allowed him to lead her up the road. They went along in silence. A labourer, coming out of a side turning, stared in surprise, and Ellis heard him stand to look after them.

Joan pulled her arm away.

" You needn't hold on to me."

" You'd rather I didn't come any further with you ? "

" You needn't. All right. If you must have it, I *would* rather go by myself."

" You shall." He stood away from her. " Go straight in. You're safe at home."

" Safe ! "

It was impossible to describe the scorn, the anger and the despair that rang in her voice. Ellis started, and watched her go up the road, his face twisted with pity. Then he turned, and made his way back towards his hiding-place.

He did not get there. Prepared for the encounter though he was, he felt his heart give a sudden jump of excitement as he saw the broad-shouldered figure of David Rattray approaching. Rattray wore a macintosh : and, as he came near, Ellis was shocked by his face. The eyes had a meaningless glitter, the face was so drawn that the man looked ten years older : and, while the cheeks were congested as in a fever, the rest of the skin was pale, with hard white lines drawn from nose to mouth.

At the sight of Ellis, Rattray began to cry out thickly, beginning when he was still too far for Ellis to hear what he said.

" —in my house again, badgering a helpless woman with your damned questions," Ellis heard. " Is no place sacred

to you? Do what you will to me, but leave her alone. This is not English justice."

For the moment Ellis wondered if he had been drinking.

"I haven't been near your house," he said, "since you last saw me there."

"You or another of your gang. What does it matter? I say—I say to you——" He began to shout, gesticulating stiffly with his arm. "Ask me what you like, but leave my wife out of it, for God's sake, or it will be the worse for you."

"Hush. Not so loud. You'll bring out half the village."

"What I have to say can be said anywhere. And it will be, soon."

"Good," Ellis said heartily. "You invite me to ask you a question. I've one or two. Hi! hi! wait a minute."

Ratray had put down his head, and made to go past him. Ellis got in his way. Ratray suddenly danced in the roadway, waving his arms.

"Let me pass! Let me pass! I have no more time for you or your like. Let me pass!"

"Answer my questions first."

Ratray became very quiet. His eyes almost closed.

"Mr. McKay. I am a strong man. I advise you not to anger me."

"I haven't the least desire to anger you. You told me a minute ago that I might question you but not your wife. I don't want to ask her any questions at all. I want to ask you one or two. That's all."

Ratray said nothing. He stood, leaning slightly forward with an animal attentiveness which Ellis found far more alarming than his frenzy.

Ratray pursed up his mouth so tightly that the shape of his teeth showed through his upper lip.

"I decline to tell you. It's no business of yours."

They stood, confronting one another. All at once everything changed for Ellis. He felt mounting in him the kind of fear that makes one hit out wildly at whatever threatens one, and he had no sooner felt it, than it changed to a consciousness of mastery and of knowledge so clear that he trembled, not with fear but with awe.

He pointed slowly at Ratray, glaring at him with all the power of his eyes.

"Paper is not the usual thing to plug a corpse's nostrils with, Ratray, but cotton wool. They used cotton wool for your mother, didn't they?"

The breath whistled in Ratray's teeth. He uttered a high

humming noise. Giving no warning, he sprang forward, and drove a furious right to Ellis's solar plexus. With a grunt that was almost a yelp, Ellis doubled up and collapsed on his face, aware, as he fell, of Rattray's bulk speeding past him and away.

The next thing Ellis knew was that he was being sick, and kind but clumsy hands were holding him. He opened his eyes, and saw Bradstreet's face, moonish with concern, bent over his own.

"Are you all right?" Bradstreet asked.

Ellis nodded. "Sod winded me," he jerked out.

"What happened? Did you try to stop him?"

"Tell you—when I get my—breath back."

"Take it easy. That was a risk, you know." Bradstreet shook his head reprovingly. "I was afraid that's what you might be up to. You should have let us know."

"Watching—for Joan. She came—didn't know he would. Hoped, though."

"Take it easy."

Ellis turned his head away, and retched again. Then, with the supporting hand of the sergeant, he scrambled to his feet.

"M'm." He made a grimace of pain. "Not in training for this sort of thing, Bradder."

"Yes?"

"He did it."

"I know."

"You know? How?"

"I went down, as we arranged, while he was out. Told his wife some cock-and-bull story. The rest of the paper was in his mackintosh pocket."

"That's one thing I've got right, anyway." He looked about him. "I wonder where he's gone."

"That's no matter," Bradstreet said cheerfully. "We'll soon get him."

"Won't be too easy. He's dangerous. And he'll be cunning as hell now."

"He wasn't very cunning about the paper."

"No. But then he must have acted like an automaton."

Bradstreet shook his head from side to side.

"I can't see what he did it for. Come to that, I can't see why he killed her at all. Unless he's gone mad."

"He's beside himself: but I doubt if he's certifiable."

"How did you know he'd done it?"

"I said it was queer, to plug a corpse's nose with paper,

instead of cotton wool, and asked if they hadn't used cotton wool on his mother."

"His mother!" Bradstreet stared. "What's she got to do with it?"

"It was Joan gave me the idea. She told me he'd nursed his mother, as a boy, till she died: that she was the first dead person he'd seen: and that it was a terrible shock to him. Well: he kills this girl, for some reason we've yet to find—though I can make a guess at it—in a fit of frenzy. Then, when he sees her dead, he remembers the other dead face, also a woman's, and tries to compose this one to the same stillness. He can't. He can't even get the eyes to shut properly. One thing he can do, though: and in a sort of trance, he feels in his pockets, finds a bit of paper, and does it."

"My God," Bradstreet said.

"At least," Ellis added, "that's my guess. Anyway, he killed her, and put the plugs in afterwards."

"Have we any evidence that he killed her? Might he have found her lying dead, and then done as you say?"

"He *might*. But, if he'd nothing to do with killing her, why keep quiet about it? Why not come and tell us what he'd found? Damn it all, Bradder, we don't want to start looking for a third murderer."

"You still keep to it, then, that the two things are separate."

"I see no reason to think otherwise. Coo!" Ellis stopped, and bent forward. "He's got a punch, that lad. I'm not half sore."

"A good job he was content with knocking you out, instead of serving you as he served her."

"Good lord!" Ellis gazed at him with round comical eyes. "I never thought of that."

Bradstreet smiled at him. Then his face set again.

"Well," he said, "we'd best get back to the station."

"I'm going home," Ellis said. "I've had enough for to-night."

"That's right. We'll let you know in the morning when we've got him."

"You're an optimist, Bradder."

"He can't get far," said Bradstreet comfortably. "We've a cordon all round, and we'll have men searching everywhere."

"If he gets into the woods, he'll lead you a dance."

"Not for long. We've hunted chaps hereabouts before now."

"In this God-fearing, law-abiding spot? Fie, Bradder, fie."

"I'm tired of that joke," said Bradstreet simply.

"Sorry. We'll give it decent burial. By the way, Bradder—what was on the paper? The bit you found in his pocket? What did the mystic letters stand for?"

"'I must see you.' She was making an appointment with him."

"I thought as much." Ellis grinned. "Nothing about semolina."

"No," Bradstreet said, in tones that suggested he was tired of that joke too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE CAR came round for Ellis soon after breakfast. There was a bruise where Rattray's fist had landed, but it had not interfered with his sleep, and he decided that it was not going to interfere with his meal.

The sergeant was at the door.

"You all right, sir?"

"Grand. Well—what's the news! Found him?"

"Yes, sir. Railway line."

"Like that, eh? Well—maybe it's the best way out. Poor devil!"

They got into the car.

"I think the Inspector feels that way too, sir. At least, mostly."

Ellis nodded. "You mean, we may have some trouble with the evidence."

"I suppose it'll come in that he was mad."

"That would save trouble, certainly. We shouldn't have to find a motive."

"Was he mad, d'you reckon, sir?"

"When he killed her? No: not in the legal sense. I think he had a motive. A reason, anyway."

The sergeant said no more. Evidently the subject still troubled his sense of delicacy, as his colour rose a little, and he concentrated on the steering wheel.

They reached the station, and Ellis went in to Bradstreet.

"Well, Bradder. That's that."

"Yes." Bradstreet's eyes were heavy and a little bloodshot.

"Bradder! You haven't been to bed."

"Too much to see to. How are you feeling?"

"Still a bit sore. Otherwise, fit as a flea."

"Good."

"When did you find him?"

"Twenty^{to} six. In Prowse's Cutting. Only a couple of miles away."

"Had he been there long?"

"Four or five hours."

"Instantaneous, I hope."

"Must have been."

Ellis pulled himself a chair, and sat down.

"Sorry," Bradstreet said: and yawned.

"Well, Bradder, he's saved us quite a bit of trouble. It'll be easy to bring in a verdict of unsound mind."

"To cover all three?" Bradder raised his head.

"Now, now, now! My dear Bradder, you know as well as I do there isn't a scrap of evidence to connect him with the Matt business."

"I don't agree with you," Bradstreet said. "To my way of thinking, he's the only person we *have* got definite evidence against. He went into the house on Friday afternoon, on his own admission. He was observed to come out in a hurry and to look up and down the road, to see if anyone was watching. We don't know how long he was in the house—we've only his own word that he was there just long enough to return the book: but, even if that's true, it wouldn't have taken long to do the job."

"And to risk the row of upsetting all those books?"

"Not much risk. Joan was in the garden. It wouldn't take him a minute to make sure that Mrs. Baildon was out. He'd only to look in the kitchen, and tiptoe quietly upstairs. Her bedroom and the bathroom are side by side, and, this weather, the doors'd be open."

Ellis shook his head decisively.

"It's physically possible, Bradder. I'll admit that. But it's wrong. There's no motive."

"I don't see that. Not if he was mad."

"I keep telling you he wasn't."

"I don't see it," Bradstreet persisted stubbornly. "I can't see how you make that out. Everything you told me about him—that night when he came in and found you with his wife——"

"Damn it, Bradder. Don't put it like that. You make me want a bath."

"I could do with one myself. But, as I was saying—everything you said about him, the way he was all wild one minute, and quite calm the next: everything goes to show he was mad. I don't mind betting the jury will think so too."

"Bradder, I'd love to have you on my side in a row ; and I'd hate to have you against me."

"I expect that's meant to be rude."

"Far from it. Exactly the reverse. It's an honest compliment, straight from the heart. I—hallo."

There was a knock, and the sergeant put his head round.

"Reverend Rawlings to see you, sir."

Bradstreet looked at Ellis.

"Show him in," he said.

Mr. Rawlings came in. He was very pale, and his shoulders were bent forward. He came straight up to Bradstreet, ignoring Ellis.

"Inspector. I feel it is my duty to hand you this."

He drew an envelope from his pocket, and with shaking hand gave it to Bradstreet. Bradstreet glanced at it, and raised his brows.

"Rattray's writing," he said.

The vicar inclined his head.

Bradstreet took out the letter, a single sheet, and spread it out on the desk. For what seemed a long time he read it. Then he looked once more at the envelope.

"Posted last evening, in time for the last collection. Seventy-three," he added, to Ellis. "That means his mind was made up before you met him."

"I don't want to seem inquisitive," said Ellis, "but you haven't yet told me what's there. Is it his confession that he killed the girl?"

"Yes. And Matt Baidon."

"*What !*" Ellis shouted.

"That's right. Both of 'em. He says here 'a double crime.' And he says again, at the end 'with these two terrible crimes on my conscience' "

"Show me."

Ellis snatched the letter. His lips moved, muttering aloud the incriminating words. He stared at the paper incredulously, then looked at Bradstreet, his face blank with bewilderment.

"I don't understand it," he stammered. "I—it's——"

Then, with a rush, his forces returned. The colour flooded his face. He slammed the letter down on the desk.

"I don't believe it," he roared. "It's not possible. It—it doesn't make *sense*."

Bradstreet and the vicar exchanged glances of commiseration. The vicar shook his head.

"There's no going beyond what he says, I'm afraid," Bradstreet said slowly.

"Indeed, no." The vicar's voice was broken. "I only wish there were. A churchwarden, too. One of my greatest helps. A man I would have staked my life on."

Ellis looked at him with warm sympathy.

"He killed the girl, sir, in a fit of hysterical passion. But he didn't kill the old man."

"He says he did. No man would accuse himself of such a crime unnecessarily."

"It's my belief he was mad," Bradstreet said. "If that is any consolation to you, Mr. Rawlings."

"If he wrote that letter, and meant it, he must have been mad," Ellis said. "Otherwise——" He began to pace the room, in a fury of agitation. After three or four lengths, he turned to them, his eyes projecting so that the whites showed all round.

"I'm the one that's mad," he cried. "I'd better give up the job." He pointed to the letter. "If that's true, then everything I know is nonsense; and I must be mad. Vicar: I pledge you my sanity Rattray didn't kill Matt Baildon."

The vicar shook his head again.

"I wish I could believe you, sir. But this poor, poor girl——" He clucked his tongue. "Will you want me any longer?" He asked Bradstreet. "Or may I go?"

"No, we needn't trouble you any more, Mr. Rawlings. You have been of great help to us. Thank you very much."

Ellis walked to the door with the vicar, full of sympathy and distress, but saw that his company, far from being a comfort, was unwelcome. The old man shrank visibly from him, and went off, head down, mutmuring to himself.

Ellis looked after him, and went back to Bradstreet.

"Well, Bradder. The home team bats on a good wicket."

"Meaning, exactly——?"

"The case is going the way you want it."

"The way I want it!" Bradstreet exclaimed. "I don't want any of it. I only——"

The telephone leaped into shrill sound, cutting him short. He stretched out a weary hand.

"Hallo. Yes. *What?*" There was a pause, while the other voice quacked lugubriously. "She's all right, you say? Right. I'll be round."

He put the receiver back, and lifted a round gray face.

"Joan Baildon has tried to kill herself."

Ellis hit the table, and swore violently.

"We've let her down again! If that child gets over this, it'll be no thanks to us. What's she done?"

"Aspirins. Fortunately, there weren't enough. Carter's with her."

"Who was it rang?"

"Nancarrow. The man I put to watch the house."

"Well." Ellis heaved himself up. "We'll go."

They did not speak in the car; but, as they got out, Bradstreet said, "Do you mind seeing to this?"

"Not a bit. I'd rather."

Bradstreet went in first. Dr. Carter was in the hall, talking over his shoulder to Mrs. Baildon. Gilkison, pale and solemn, peeped out behind him.

"She'll do, now," Carter was saying. He caught sight of Ellis, and bristled like a large dog. "More of your work," he snarled. "I hope you're satisfied."

"Don't talk like a child," Ellis shot back at him. "This is a murder case."

So furious was his tone, and so menacing his glare, that the big doctor recoiled. As Ellis advanced to the stair foot, he put out an arm.

"Leave her alone. She must have absolute quiet."

"Out of my way."

Ellis pushed past him and up the stairs.

"I won't be responsible for the consequences," Carter called after him: but got no reply.

"May I come in?"

Ellis opened the door, and closed it gently after him. Joan Baildon was sitting up in bed. She was very pale, and her eyes without the glasses had, despite their drowsiness, a queer beauty.

Ellis sat on the bed, and took her hand. She smiled wanly, and did not resist.

"You *are* a silly girl. What did you go and act the goat like this for?"

"I did it. I killed father."

"Now, now, now." He wagged a finger at her. "You did nothing of the kind."

"How do you know? You weren't there."

"There's a positive orgy of confessions to killing your father. You're too late. You should have thought of it sooner."

Terror glimmered in her eyes.

"Why—who——" she whispered.

"David's confessed that he did it."

"David!" She sat straight up in utter astonishment. "*David!* Nonsense!"

"My very words. But not his. Bradstreet and Co. will take his."

"But—what did he say? When? Oh, I can't—it's not true. He couldn't have said it."

"He wrote to the vicar, and said he had killed Eunice, and then spoke of his 'double crime,' and 'two terrible crimes.'"

"You idiot!" Relief brought a touch of colour to her face. "He didn't mean *that*!"

Ellis leaned forward.

"What did he mean?"

She pulled her hand free, and threw herself back, hiding her face in the pillow.

"Joan. Tell me, please. What did he mean?"

A muffled murmur came: "I can't tell you." Ellis looked down at her compassionately.

"I think I know. It was what happened between him and Eunice on Sunday evening. Wasn't it?"

She nodded into the pillow. Her shoulders were shaking. He patted her arm.

"I thought so. Poor chap. Poor David. Why did he have to take it so hard? Why kill the girl?"

She turned a tear-stained face. "He'd have had to kill himself or her. He—oh."

She buried her face again. For a few seconds there was no sound but her sobs.

"Joan. Listen. Just one moment, there's a dear. Joan. I won't ask you anything I've no business to know. What was between him and you is sacred, and no one shall touch it. But there are one or two things I must ask."

He waited for a few seconds.

"How do you know what you've just told me? I stopped you from seeing him last night, and I stopped him from seeing you."

"Oh, why did you?"

"He'd killed one girl: and, in his twisted mood, how could I dare let him meet you?"

"David would never have harmed me, never, never, never!"

"I couldn't risk it, Joan. And I didn't want him to add to your burden by telling you more than you should know."

"Anything was better than not knowing."

"You were afraid, then——?"

"Oh, don't ask me! Don't keep probing at me." She flung herself sideways, her face away from him. "Here," she said

suddenly, groping beneath the pillow; and handed him a crumpled letter.

Ellis stared at it, and at her.

"How did you get this?"

"We'd an arrangement, that in an emergency he'd put a message in a certain place, and make a certain signal. Last night he made the signal."

"The house was being watched, you know."

"The place was down at the side, by the currant bushes."

"When did he do this—oh, never mind. You got it, that's all that matters. Will you show me the bit I ought to see?"

"Don't you want to see it all?" she asked bitterly.

"You'll have to hand the letter over, I'm afraid. That's the law. But this, now, is between you and me."

"Very well. Don't read the last page."

He read all he needed to read, and put the letter back in its envelope.

"You may read it all, if you want to," she said, from the pillow.

"That's kind of you. But I don't think I will."

"You will afterwards, so why not now?"

"I won't, at any time. Not the personal part."

"It won't matter to me if you do or not." She sat up. "You've got to arrest me. Nothing'll matter."

"I'm certainly not going to waste my time arresting you."

"But you've got to. I've confessed. I killed father."

"You did no such thing."

"I did. I did. You can't say I didn't, when I say I did."

"I can. I do. I know you didn't."

"How?"

"Because you didn't know that the second edition of *Lakewater* had been substituted for the first with the cancelled advertisement. You expected to find the ordinary first edition."

She looked at him blankly.

"What on earth has that got to do with it?"

"It's got everything to do with it. Come off it, Joan. I know the whole bag of tricks."

"You don't."

"Yes, I do. I know how Eunice dressed up and helped you——"

"Eunice!" She stared, then laughed. "Oh! You mean, selling the books? That wasn't Eunice."

"Who was it, then?"

"That was auntie. Auntie Martha."

"The hell it was!" ejaculated Ellis. "Well, I'm damned! The old coot."

"You're not to talk that way about auntie." She was smiling now, and her eyes were alive. She might have been convalescent from 'flu or a cold. "There, you see, you're quite wrong. That's what comes of being so cocksure."

"It does. It does indeed. I thought that because Eunice helped you with the typing, she sold the books."

"Wrong again!"

"The letter was typed on her machine."

"I know. I typed it."

She laughed at his face. Then her own clouded again.

"Eunice wasn't so friendly to me lately. Though I'm sure she'd have helped if I'd asked her. Only, as things were, I didn't like to."

"I know. She was jealous because David came to give you lessons. She thought David was ousting her from the first place in your affections."

The girl stared at him.

"You *are* blind! You've got everything wrong. She wasn't jealous because she thought I was fond of David. She was jealous because she thought David was in love with me, instead of with her. That was why she—she——"

"Tempted him, that night?"

She covered her face with her hands.

Ellis got up.

"Well," he said heavily. "You're right. I've made a rare fool of myself."

She looked at him between her fingers.

"Where are you going?"

"To get on with things. We haven't got your father's murderer yet."

"I tell you, I did it."

"Don't go on saying that, like a parrot."

Suddenly Joan began to scream at the top of her voice.

"I did it, I tell you, I did it! I killed daddy!"

Ellis jumped. It was the first time he had ever heard her use the pet name, and he guessed how far back into childhood her evil hour had thrown her. Before he could say anything, the door opened slowly, and Mrs. Baildon stood there.

Her face was white as paper. Her great eyes seemed jet black.

"Be quiet, Joan." The voice was deep and difficult. She turned to Ellis. "Don't you believe her."

"I don't, Mrs. Baildon. Not a word."

"Yes." She swayed on her feet, and recovered, holding on to the doorpost. "Come with me," she said to Ellis. "I have something to say to you."

A cry of despair came from her bed. "Mummy! darling mummy!" Then, to Ellis, "Don't believe her! Don't believe her! Don't believe her!"

Mrs. Baildon closed her eyes.

"Don't waste time," she said. "There isn't much."

Ellis started, and looked at her closely.

"Mrs. Baildon——"

She motioned him to be silent. "Come."

He gave Joan a swift glance, and held the door for her mother. The girl lay back with a face of utter grief: but it was the grief of a child, no longer the frozen unnatural grief of one old before her time.

Mrs. Baildon was unsteady on her feet. Ellis took her arm.

"I'll get you Dr. Carter."

"No. There isn't time."

He led her into her room, and lowered her into an armchair. Breathing heavily, she sat with closed eyes, holding the arms.

"Listen. I killed Matt."

"I know, Mrs. Baildon."

She nodded. "I came back from Miss Jenkinson, to get something I'd forgotten to bring for Martha. I came in the back way. Joan was reading. She didn't see me."

"You planned it well."

She shook her head. "I didn't plan it at all."

The words came slowly, chosen with care, driven out by an effort of the will.

"I came back to get a recipe I'd promised Martha. Matt called to me. 'Get me the paper knife.' He always spoke that way, but somehow, this time, something went snap inside me. I went into the room. He was sitting in his chair. He didn't look round. It came into me all of a sudden. I looked at him. 'Go on,' he said. 'Put it down.' I took the two ends of his muffler. I pulled them down, and I leaned right on them with all my might. The chair was close in against the bookshelf. I did it that way because, else, the chair ran on its wheels and eased the pull, and this way, it pressed against me, and I was against the books. Out of one eye I saw his hands beat at the air once or twice like a kitten. Then he went limp. I threw the ends of the muffler across his shoulders, I shoved the chair nearer the window, I pushed him out on the floor. Then I went round and shook the bookcase. I had to shake

hard. I nearly did it wrong and brought the books down on top of me. Then I went away down to Martha."

She was breathing faster and more noisily.

"It all looked so ordinary . . . by the time I got to Martha. . I couldn't hardly believe I'd done it. I half believed I'd find him as usual when I got back."

"Did you tell Miss Attwill?"

"No."

"Mrs. Baildon."

She did not seem to hear. He bent down, and spoke in her ear.

"Mrs. Baildon. We'll want a bit more. Try to tell me, for Joan's sake. We want her absolutely clear. I knew she hadn't done it, because of the changed copy of *Lakewater*. It was a shock to her to find the second edition. Did you change that?"

She shook her head.

"Who, then? Joan was taken by surprise, all right. I can't believe she was acting."

"M—Martha. She saw in the Literary Supplement that a copy had fetched a big price. . . . I took the best one, and put the other first edition in its place. Then Martha came, not knowing. She thought I'd forgotten it. . . . Not that day. Afterwards. So there was only the other copy . . . and I'd only time . . . to put it . . . so that he . . . the man . . . shouldn't . . . see the gap."

Her head dropped forward. Ellis stood back, looking down at her. He took her hand, pressed it, then hurried down the stairs.

"Fetch Carter back, quick."

"What is it?" Bradstreet asked.

"The mother. I don't know what she's taken, but she's made no mistake about it."

Bradstreet ran out, and called to the sergeant. Then he came back, his face gray. Ellis took his arm.

"I'm sorry, Bradder. She's told me everything."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ELLIS, Bradstreet and Gilkison sat round a table in the garden of the Plume of Feathers.

"Never," Ellis was saying, "have I made a bigger fool of myself. I was wrong in every material particular."

"Except who did it," Bradstreet corrected him. "You got 'em both."

"But for the wrong reasons—which doesn't count. Like getting the right answer to a sum from the wrong working. No marks. Two out of ten, at the most. No, Bradder, I mucked it. I mucked it from A to Z."

"You didn't muck Rattray. You put me on to him."

"I only got him by a long shot. It's no good knowing who did a thing if you can't prove it. Besides, who the hell else could have done it? There wasn't even another suspect. The best we could do was a mythical soldier."

"You insisted that the two murders were separate, and I wouldn't have it."

"I couldn't see anything to connect 'em. Listen, now, to the tale of my boss shots. Take Matt first. I saw there were only two people in it, the two people who stood to gain everything if Matt died, and to lose a hell of a lot, if, with Gilkie's help, he found his books had gone. I ruled out Joan, soundly enough, but because I decided her mother had put the second edition in place of the first: and it wasn't the mother at all. I put the murder on Mrs. Baildon because the motive was overwhelming, and because I saw she could have sneaked back easily at any time in the afternoon. Her alibi wasn't worth a damn. Old Martha would swear to anything, and not bat an eyelid. There were motive and opportunity: and the thing turns out to have been quite unpremeditated."

"You weren't to know that. No one could know."

"It's no good to spot the culprit for the wrong reasons. No, Bradder. You don't get me out of it like that. I made another whacking great error, too."

"What was that?"

"Martha. I never suspected her."

"What of?"

"The murder. Man, surely, you see? If she could give Mrs. B. an alibi, Mrs. B. could just as well give her one. What was to stop Mrs. B. sitting down at the cottage, and Martha

nipping up and throttling old Matt? And it never once crossed my mind."

"I did think of that," Bradstreet said.

"The devil you did! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't see how it would help."

Ellis looked at him affectionately.

"You so-and-so old such-and-such! how much else have you been keeping up your sleeve? Well; to resume. I was plain wrong about Rattray and the Caunter girl and Joan. I thought the Caunter girl was jealous because Joan's affections were being transferred to Rattray. Actually, she was jealous because Rattray's affections were being transferred to Joan. So she set to work to seduce him. The poor devil was sex-starved, with that wretched sickly wife of his, and, on Sunday evening, she succeeded. The result on him was terrible: witness the state he was in when he rushed in and found me in his sitting-room. And, once he'd controlled it and driven it inwards, it was worse still. He was a strict Christian: he'd been false to all his standards, and he'd made himself unworthy of the romantic affection between him and Joan. So, when the Caunter came at him again, the very next night, to consolidate her victory, or else to revile him for ruining her—she was a born scene-maker, and you bet she used her chance to the full—he went right off the deep end, and probably without meaning to, he throttled her. He was a very strong man: I dare say he just took her by the neck and shook her a bit too hard.

"Then, when he realised what he'd done, he went into a trance of horror, and automatically tried to make her dead face look like the only other dead face he'd seen."

Bradstreet shifted uneasily, and made a sound of protest.

"All right, Bradder. We'll skip that bit. God knows what agonies the poor devil went through after that. Anyway, he decided to make an end of himself. He wrote to the vicar, and he wrote that heart-breaking letter to poor little Joan. This one was too late for the post, so he set off to deliver it himself. I met him, and hindered him: but he managed to deliver it none the less."

"I've spoken to Nancarrow about that," Bradstreet said.

"He swears he never saw or heard a thing."

"I'll believe him. Rattray in that state would be cunning as a weasel. Ask Nancarrow if he heard a cat on the prowl.

"Was that the signal?" Bradstreet's brow furrowed.

"She must have had a lot of false alarms."

"Not from an arranged sequence of miaows. Anyway, that's what happened. Joan told me, this afternoon."

"How was she?"

"For the moment, marvellous. There'll be a terrible reaction, of course. She doesn't realise it, yet. Poor child! It's enough to kill her. Everyone she loved gone, except old Martha. A formidable exception. Old Martha will pull her round. She's with her now, chatting away, as ordinary as you please."

"Did Joan know her mother had done it?" Gilkison asked.

"Her mother didn't tell her. God knows what she guessed."

"It's terrible," Bradstreet said. "What will become of the child?"

"Leave it to old Martha. She's got it all taped. Joan's to move straight to her, the books are to be sold, the house, everything. A clean sweep . . . then Oxford, and a clear run to the future. I believe it'll work, too. This is all so fantastic, so violent, it will fall away from her like a dream: with the help of a clean, immediate break."

"It's a mercy you came in time to get the facts from that poor woman."

"Yes." Ellis made a grimace. "I don't think she knew it would act so quickly."

"How did she get it?"

"Matt had 'em, on Carter's prescription. He's a caution, that old boy. He roared at me for not calling him sooner: but he had to admit he couldn't have done anything. Truculent, soft-hearted old swab."

"Well," Bradstreet said, "thank goodness it's all over."

"Amen to that," Ellis replied. "I can't make a fool of myself any more—till next time."

THE END

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